

Akuyaku Tensei Dakedo Doushite Kou Natta.

(悪役転生だけどどうしてこうなった。)

Arc 01

Part 03

Sekimura Imuya
(関村イムヤ)

Story Description:

Eliza Kaldia, who reincarnated as a noble girl villainess in a fantasy otome game, was stuck in a world that seemed far from her image of how noble girls should be living, as the fated events of the game were still far off while she remained a child. In the first place, it was suspect if she could even live to make it to the school setting of the game. Due to changes in the situation of the neighboring country which never appeared in the original game, the world became nothing like the flowery school life from the game. It was a world where even young girls had to take up weapons. How did it turn out this way...

I don't have any cheat-like abilities. I can't use magic. My sense of ethics might have become a little twisted due to being reincarnated.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

Chapter 31: A Day In Midsummer

People were strung up on wooden stakes as the smoke rose around them, and I could only watch without diverting my eyes. Under the harsh summer sun, with the burning straw beneath them, the people that were in the process of dying could do nothing but scream and scream.

There were other people that were truly enjoying the sight of the last moments of those thrashing about terribly on the wooden stakes. They would sometimes add oil to the fire or douse it with water, seeming to want to prolong the suffering of the victims.

The screams would slow down and gradually stop as what used to be human turned black on the stakes. Before I realized it, there was a horrible stench drifting around me.

At the same time that the heat and stench caused me to vomit reflexively, I heard the sound of raucous laughter next to me. It sounded so out of place at this type of location, that I couldn't get it out of my head and it agitated me greatly.

I couldn't take any more of this, and all I wanted to do was crouch up into a ball and close my eyes and cover my ears, but because I was being held in someone's arms, I couldn't do so.

Let me go, I desperately tried to say that but I wasn't able to talk yet, and the adult arm was easily able to hold on to my baby body.

Everything's a blur. I feel like my head will break with how much it hurts.

The summer heat, the hot air from the fire, the stench, they combined to choke me. My nausea was at the limit of what I could bear, and something traveled up my esophagus as I reflexively vomited. The smell of my own vomit mixed with the stench of burnt flesh and made things smell even worse.

After staring at my own puddle of vomit in a daze for a bit, I slowly raised my head. I wanted to take a look at the person that was holding

me. It was almost something instinctive, I'm not sure myself why I wanted to do so. But, after I looked at him, I regretted it from the bottom of my heart.

He had beautiful long black hair, with eyes the color of blood, and he was smiling with an ecstatic expression as he looked back into my eyes.

I realized that he was my own father, and I woke up from my nightmare in my own bed.

In the stifling hot atmosphere of my room, I hurriedly wiped off the sweat dripping down my cheeks. Perhaps it was because of the nightmare though, my hands were cold, and I was shaking badly.

Without even opening my curtains, I left my room. I wanted cool, refreshing air, but even outside it was hot. I'm fed up with this suffocating heat and humidity. I opened the window, and at least some fresh air came blowing in.

It's currently the hottest summer that I've experienced in the Kaldia domain.

There's been an increasing number of people getting heat stroke in the western part of my domain, we've been too busy dealing with that to set up the civil militia yet. Earl Terejia and I have been confined to our rooms dealing with how much work there is, but the servants forced us to get plenty of water and take breaks as well.

The soldiers have begun returning from the eastern village construction project. The refugees have begun moving there in groups of twenty. Since there's more water in the east, the climate there is milder and I heard from some of the soldiers that they wished they were still there.

Kamil's still not back at the mansion yet, it'll be at least two months before things finish and he returns.

I took off my nightclothes that were soaked in sweat, and put on a light tunic and dalmatic. Mrs. Hortensia should probably be helping with breakfast preparations, and she won't be coming to wake me up. After I turned five, I didn't need anyone coming to wake me up anymore unless I

overslept.

My neck felt sticky with sweat and uncomfortable, and I looked for a maid on my way to the dining hall. Since Phoebe and Isadora are the only maids here, it's hard to find them during the morning when it's so busy. I got lucky today though, I found Isadora just as she was taking the laundry back into the mansion.

“Good morning, ojou-sama.”

“Good day, Isadora. Sorry, but please clean my bedroom today as well.”

Those nightclothes have to be washed before I'd wear them again, and my sheets were soaked in sweat as well. Getting a nightmare just because of how hot the weather's been, I want to improve the comfort of my bed even if it's only by a little.

Maybe it's the same for everyone else, the heat's getting to them, Isadora just nodded and responded in a low voice.

“I understand. Was there anything else you needed of me?”

“After breakfast, I would like to wipe my body down. Please make the preparations for me.”

Isadora nodded again, bowed, then hurriedly walked down the hallway in a busy manner. Getting the laundry is a maid's job, but actually washing it is the maidservant's job. Without even needing to take my time and eat slowly, my room will probably be ready with a wash basin and towel.

For once, Earl Terejia, Mrs. Marshan, and even Claudia were all there at breakfast at the same time. Since Elise always took her meals in her room, that means that other than her, just about everyone else was coincidentally in the dining hall right now.

.....Come to think of it, I haven't visited Elise for a while. Recently Elise has been getting better, and she would often be out in the garden during the day, so there's been no need to visit her room.

Let's go see her today.

After I wiped myself with the towel that Isadora prepared for me, I arrived at Elise's room, just when Maya came walking out at a brisk pace.

"Ah, Eliza-sama."

"Where are you going, Maya? It's rare to see you not by Elise-dono's side."

Since Maya is Elise's personal maid that she brought along with her, they spend most of their time together. It's rather unusual to see her going somewhere else by herself especially during the day. Today, rare things keep happening.

"Yes, the earl called for me today."

"The earl..... I see. I'll take care of Elise for the time being."

"Thank you very much. Sorry for the trouble, but please take good care of Elise."

Maya seemed slightly relieved, and went off briskly again. Since Elise often has coughing attacks, she probably doesn't want to leave her alone.

And so I knocked on Elise's door, and heard her saying please come in. Compared to when she first arrived here, it sounded much more energetic.

"Elise-dono, pardon my intrusion."

"Eliza-sama! Welcome."

Instead of sitting on her bed like usual, Elise was sitting on a chair against the window. Her face was beaming and she was about to stand up, but I motioned her to stop, saying it was fine.

"You seem to be doing well today."

".....Yes, thanks to this place I've become very healthy."

She was smiling and nodding happily, and I approached her to see what she was up to. I stood next to Elise and suddenly felt slightly shy, as she was looking outside, I spoke up in a quiet voice.

"Outside?"

“Yes. From here, I can see the garden, as well as the pond on the other side.”

Looking at the scenery from here, she seemed instilled with energy, and she laughed. Ahh, I made a casual reply, and looked outside as well, and saw the garden and pond that Elise was talking about. It's the place where I got the poisonous hemlock. Since the pond isn't a place that the gardener's required to take care of, there might even still be some there still. Although, when the soldiers were connecting the pond to the water tank for the barracks' bath, they probably should have gotten rid of any poisonous plants already.

Various types of colorful vegetation surrounded the water, looking at it from a distance made it seem quite pretty. In a well-shaded location, I squinted and saw a tiny grave. So one could also see that grave from here, eh.

“.....You shouldn't be going to the pond.”

“Of course, I know very well. Until I get healthier and more energetic, I won't go out from the garden.”

I warned Elise as a reminder that the pond was dangerous, but I still saw a longing for the water in her eyes.

Chapter 32: Order To Dispatch Troops

The days passed by as reports came in about the fire moth extermination and how the eastern village construction was progressing. The other day, thirty warhorses from the Ruktoferd domain were delivered to us, so Earl Terejia's establishment of a cavalry troop has become one step closer to realization, and other than that, not much has happened.

Then, a messenger from the Jugfena royal domain's army arrived at the Kaldia domain.

The earl and I welcomed him in the mansion's drawing room. The soldier was completely covered from head to toe in chain mail, with a tunic embroidered with the Arxia Kingdom's coat of arms, a crown and the Sacred Code, covering his armor. I pulled on the earl's sleeve carefully so as to not dirty it, and got "he's a knight" as a response in return.

I see, so he's a knight. It's okay to use knights as messengers.

Knights are what we call nobles that have become military officers. To be more precise, knights are those that have officially entered the knights, and commoners that enter the knights can become titled knights as well. Since nobles without titles can become titled knights as well, entering the knighthood is basically a way to earn nobility.

"Welcome to the Kaldia domain."

"I'm greatly obliged for your welcome. I bring a message from the leader of the Jugfena Fortress Knights, Earl Einsbark."

The knight entered without even sitting down, and remained standing between the chair and the desk. It's some urgent business. Since he was still standing, the earl and I remained standing as well.

The knight looked at the earl's expression of anticipation, and solemnly began speaking.

"About ten women and children from the Shiru tribe have arrived at Fort Jugfena. They're currently under our protection."

.....At the knight's words, I gently closed my eyes. The time has finally come, eh. It's been two months since we decided to accept the refugees, the Shiru tribe has done well to escape from the Densel army.

"According to one of them, there's still forty more of the Shiru tribe that will arrive. They're being pursued by a company of three hundred Densel soldiers. The Kaldia domain has agreed to take in the refugees, so will there be any problems in accepting them?"

"There are none."

When I answered, the knight looked at me in surprise. Mmm, although he glanced at Earl Terejia, the earl nodded and he nodded back before looking me in the eye. He's a praiseworthy knight. Even when others know that I'm Viscountess Kaldia, they always treat Earl Terejia as the domain lord instead.

"Very well then. Together with the one thousand refugees currently under protection at the fort, it shall be fine to send them here as promised?"

"Yes, of course."

The knight nodded at me, then he hesitated a little.

".....Viscountess Kaldia, Earl Einsbark would like to request for your aid in defending Fort Jugfena."

I could see that he was troubled and perplexed in his eyes, and he was looking at me with a changed expression. He seemed to be feeling a sense of guilt, it's very easy to see that he probably doesn't want to involve children in battle.

He's honest about his feelings. And, he's very ethical.

I remembered that when Earl Terejia first taught me about the neighboring country, he had avoided looking me in the eyes.

"I shall accept this request. I'll take fifty soldiers from the Kaldia army and travel to Fort Jugfena."

".....You will personally?"

It felt like he couldn't help himself when he asked that question. Oops, said the expression on the knight's face, as he looked at me with wonder and good will.

His values seem similar to what I remember from my previous life. In this world, it was very ordinary for there to be child soldiers younger than ten, and it wasn't all that rare for domain lords that were just past five years old to be in battle. I felt a strange sense of nostalgia as I firmly nodded in response to him.

".....I understand. I'll inform Earl Einsbark. I shall excuse myself and take my leave now."

The next morning, a messenger pigeon arrived from the royal capital.

The message it brought was an order to dispatch troops from the Upper House of Lords. The Upper House of Lords is also commonly referred to as the "Imperial Court," it's where representatives of the king and the House of Lords make various decisions. It's similar to feudal governments that I learned about in my previous life, and it consists of the king, prime minister, commander-in-chief, royal priest, head priest, three judges, and five representatives from the House of Lords.

"Viscountess Kaldia shall command her domain's army and join the defense of Fort Jugfena..... Even the royal palace went to the trouble of drafting such an order."

There's no doubt that this has to do with Earl Terejia's actions and our acceptance of the refugees. Receiving a direct order from the Upper House of Lords, even three times in a lifetime is considered to be very rare. On top of that, it was also sealed with a royal decree from the king.

I think a simple order from the regular House of Lords should have been sufficient, it feels that even the people in higher places are giving the Kaldia domain their recognition. As I looked at the order documents, I sat down reflexively.

"How long are you going to rest and relax there when you shouldn't have the free time to be slacking off, Aida-dono!"

“It’s Eliza, Claudia-dono.”

“Mmm, my apologies. Well then, it’s time for you to issue a command for the army to move out already! Come on, hurry up.”

As I looked at the person in front of me, Claudia seemed to be overly excited and wasn’t even trying to hide it. This girl.....

“There’s something I would like to talk about with you before that.”

“Hm?”

I sighed as I began talking to Claudia. She tilted her head, and smiled with what passed for her serious expression. I already understand well after associating with her for several months that she’s always serious in her own way.

But even so, this is a very serious topic, so I put on a serious expression as well.

“I believe Earl Terejia should have already asked you to become my bodyguard in place of Kamil.”

“Mm! Hm.....?”

.....I wonder if me trying to have a serious discussion with her meant that I’m an idiot? Am I in the wrong? At Claudia’s confused response, I suddenly felt a sense of futility within me. Maybe I made a mistake from the very moment I decided to have her become my bodyguard.

“..... Oh, oh! Come to think of it, he did tell me something like that.”

Claudia struck her hand with her fist as she remembered, and I swallowed down my imminent sigh. It seems that she had completely forgotten about it up until now. It’s just that for once, she was able to read the atmosphere and went along with what I said.

“Unfortunately, Kamil is currently unable to return from overseeing the village construction. There’s nobody else that can speak the language of the new incoming settlers, so there’s no one else that can take charge of the construction project.”

“Ahh, I see how everything is.”

Mmm, mmm, Claudia kept nodding and responding vaguely, but I wonder just how much of what I said she took in.....

“Meaning, it’s not possible for Kamil to return and be my bodyguard, so if it’s possible, since I have to go to Fort Jugfena now, I would like to request Claudia-dono to become my bodyguard. Is that alright?”

“Of course, no problem.”

She answered immediately with a delighted smile. I see, it’s no problem, then that’s good.

“Then, until I return from the fort, I’ll be leaving you in charge of things here at the mansion.”

Claudia didn’t seem to have noticed the way I had worded my request, and say that she’d protect me during battle as well. I’m really glad that she didn’t say something like that. Claudia’s been entrusted to the Kaldia domain. If she happened to die or get injured in battle, it would become a major incident.

“.....What!? Won’t I be unable to protect you during the battle then!!”

“It’ll be less dangerous here at the Kaldia domain, and of course I can’t have Claudia-dono accompany me to the front lines of battle at the fort.”

“No~! I’m going to go along with you to protect you!”

Wah, I hurriedly retracted my earlier statement on leaving her behind and made my escape, running for the domain lord’s office. I have to make a report to the earl on what just happened.

Chapter 33: Along The Way (Part 1)

Since Earl Terejia's private army was assigned to the defense of the mansion, I had to summon thirty soldiers back from the village construction and take another twenty soldiers that still remained here. With this, I'll have the fifty soldiers I promised to that knight.

Together with Gunther's orders, the soldiers marched in tandem with me overlooking them while riding my horse. Since soldiers-in-training will be leading the reins for me, compared to my birthday celebration, it's a lot easier.

"I thought you weren't able to ride a horse....."

Claudia who was walking next to me muttered that under her breath. Since she had helped me ride part way on our return trip from the royal capital, she's gotten the impression that I'm unable to ride by myself.

"It's not that I can't ride, I just didn't have the strength to control a horse for that long."

"How weak. When we return, I'm going to instill some intensive training for physical fitness into you."

I staggered a little at Claudia's grandiose exaggeration and touched my temple as I felt a slight headache coming on. It's not that I'm all that weak, I just have the strength of a six year old still.

I went on without bothering to reply, and on my other side, Gunther arrived next to me. Claudia called out his name in such a bright voice.

"Gunther!"

"Yo, ojou-chan, and 'my lord.' The march is going well."

Agil was the one in charge of the overall marching, while Gunther commanded from the front. It seems that the longest serving soldiers have become a bit revved up, I nodded slightly at him, then tilted my head.

".....Um, what's with calling me my lord?"

“Ah? You don’t think it’s fitting?”

Of course it wouldn’t be fitting when you suddenly change the way you address me. For the person who’s always called me “brat” up until now to suddenly address me as “my lord,” of course I’m going to have a hard time adjusting to it.

When I was living in the barracks with the other soldiers, at first they were calling me brat just like Gunther, but after they got used to me they were calling me Charlie for some reason, the same as Kamil. Gunther had stubbornly never changed his way of calling me, so that’s why I’m so shocked now.

“You should be more happy like the brat you are that I’ve given you my recognition. Should I drop the honorifics?”

Gunther was laughing delightedly at his own sarcastic remark, while I furrowed my brows. It feels like those words have completely overturned the nature of our relationship up until now. So far I really haven’t experienced what it’s like to be a noble and the domain lord, just the relationship between adults and children, instructor and apprentice, those are the only types of attitudes that Gunther has taken with me up until now.

It’s really so sudden, I suppose there’s no changing Gunther’s view of me now.

“You’re really not honest with your feelings.”

“That’s so true.”

“..... Well..... whatever, ... fine. Besides that, there’s something I want to talk about immediately. To have Agil be commanding up until now along the way, I wasn’t..... informed of this.”

Gunther’s sarcasm with Claudia chiming in didn’t sound all that bad at all. I tried to start a serious conversation immediately while Claudia was being relatively quiet for her. When the question was brought up to Gunther, he shrugged and laughed. He’s not a very mature person.

“Our path was planned out in advance. We’re really not going to pass by

the village construction site?”

“No. If we head directly east to the new village the Monster Forest will be on our path, as well as many ponds. We’ll resupply at Cyril village.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, I see, I see. At any rate, my lord probably just got into a fight of some sort with Kamil and doesn’t want to see his face.”

After leaving that remark, Gunther went back to the front of the marching formation. As expected because we’ve known each other for so long, he’s good at reading me. It wasn’t a fight though. It was one-sided, with me chasing him away.

When we arrived at Cyril village to resupply and rest for one night, it was just like last time during my birthday celebration, the atmosphere was filled with tension. Maybe it’s because this place is far away from other villages, the heavy feeling of being unwelcome here was extremely uncomfortable.

While feeling the sharp gazes of the villagers looking at me, I gave the order to resupply our water from the river flowing through the center of the village.

The rivers flowing through the Kaldia domain all have melted snow from the Amon Nor Mountains as their water source. Since Cyril village is the closest village to the mountains, they can use the water directly from the river as a clean source of drinking water.

I had my horse drink some water as well, wiped down its sweat, and fed it. The young boy novice soldier leading my horse didn’t have the strength to control him and lost control for a bit.

“S, sorry, my lord.”

“I don’t mind. Don’t waste your strength talking and try to recover some strength. Tomorrow we’re doubling our pace.”

Next to the village, we set up tents where about thirty of the soldiers would be sleeping tonight. The soldiers were able to set everything up swiftly and give orders efficiently, it must be due to the soldiers that returned from assisting with the village construction. We’ve collected a

large number of tents from the neighboring domains for the sake of the new citizens, and they're used to camping outside.

As I looked at the sight of me washing my hands in the river, and was able to get some rest for myself, the young boy novice soldier slowly came up next to me at a crawling pace, and sat down next to me.

He seems slightly older than Elise. He wasn't very tall, and he had a slender figure. He had fluffy, bouncy golden blonde hair. He looked at my hands in the river with strong curiosity in his eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"As you can see, I'm soaking my hands in the cool water."

My hands were damp with sweat due to gripping my reins tightly as to not fall off my horse, so immersing my hands in the river felt really good. The river water that had melted snow as its source felt nice and cool in the summer heat.

The boy novice soldier imitated me and submerged his hands in the water as well. Ah, it's really cold, escaped his mouth as he smiled happily.

"Ahh, I want to take a bath in this river."

"Although it's very hot, you're not allowed to enter the river. You'll get the water dirty. Soak a cloth in water and wipe yourself down with it instead."

"Okay. – Somehow, it doesn't feel like my lord is actually younger than me. Rather, it almost feels like you're the older one."

I didn't know what would be good to say to the boy who seemed like he was admiring me, so I looked back at the surface of the water. The boy next to me giggled. In this village of tense feelings, it gave a strangely calm feeling.

"Before I entered the Kaldia domain's army, the villagers were scared of my lord. When I actually saw you as well, I also thought that my lord was a scary person. My lord, it's because you don't laugh. But after talking

with you today, I think it's okay to not be so scared of you."

"....."

"However, since my parents didn't really struggle all that much under the despotic rule of the previous domain lord, I might be the only one that feels this way. But, I think that people will still be scared of my lord if they don't know how you really are. It's such a waste. Ah, even though my lord has a cute face, it's scary because you always have a grim expression. I think that's a waste as well."

Without even any context, he started a monologue on this topic for some reason, what's more he even offered his unsolicited opinion, but somehow, I still felt mysteriously calm, and didn't even mind that he was a bit meddlesome and listened to all of it. The summer heat around me was being blown away by the cool breeze coming down the mountains.

It almost feels like Kamil's talking with me. I wonder if it's because this boy's atmosphere resembles Kamil's in some way?

Finally, silence fell on the riverbank. For a while, the two of us merely listened to the sounds of the wind and the babbling river.

Suddenly, there was a commotion from the village, and the sky turned slightly crimson. As I looked at the sunlight reflecting off the water with a tinge of orange, Claudia called for me.

"Eliza-dono, it's an urgent situation."

On top of how rare it was for her to get my name right, Claudia looked more serious than I had ever seen her before. The boy novice soldier also looked at Claudia uneasily.

"What happened?"

"A monster has been discovered in the forest near the village. It seems similar to a gigantic rizer lizard. Anyways, please come to the tents first."

While making her report, Claudia was already lifting me up onto my horse. Then, she jumped on behind me, and while turning the horse around she called out to the boy novice soldier.

“Could you get some more details from the villagers? The person who discovered the monster should still be resting at the village hall.”

“Yes!”

Chapter 34: Along The Way (Part 2)

I sat down in the back of the tent on a cushion, and the soldiers gathered around me and sat down in a circle, cross-legged in western style. We left the tent flaps half open, so that the air wouldn't get too stuffy. I stirred the cup of water that Claudia sitting next to me offered.

Across from Claudia was Gunther, and next to him was the soldier named Agil, and they had tense expressions on their faces.

By Claudia's side were some men and women in dirty clothes, looking at us nervously with extremely unsettled expressions. They seem to be the leaders of Cyril village's militia. There's not enough men in this domain, even women have to be part of the militia.

Sitting down in the innermost part of the tent was Cyril village's mayor, he was looking at me with a frightened expression. Due to the incident in this village before with the orphan girl, I see that the fear instilled in him for having him and his daughter flogged in front of the other villagers hasn't faded.

Sitting down in a place farthest from the center, was the boy novice soldier from before, looking around in puzzlement. It seems that his name is Paulo, and after being ordered by Claudia to collect information, he's returned really quickly.

"Paulo, report on the monster that the villagers saw."

"Y, yes!"

As expected, he wasn't used to these sorts of gatherings, and Paulo replied with a high-pitched voice filled with nervousness. He met Gunther's sharp gaze and squeaked a little, then swallowed his saliva several times to collect himself.

"According to the villagers, while patrolling to guard against the fire moths, in the forest just north of the village, they seem to have seen a large creature they've never seen before that look similar to a gigantic rizer earth lizard. Because it seems to prey on sheep, it could be damaging

to the village if we just leave it alone.”

A carnivorous gigantic lizard, eh. Indeed, it doesn't sound like we can just let it be. It's been discovered too close to the village. It's right next to the patrol route for guarding against the fire moths.

And if it really turns out to be magical beasts, I'll take measures against it described in the book on magical beasts.

“Do you have a more detailed description of the monster?”

“Yes. It's different from the earth lizard, instead of scales, it seems to be covered in some sort of crystal resembling rock and ice.”

Then he went on to describe the more detailed features, and all I could imagine was a true monster. Since it snows year round at the Amon Nor Mountains close to here, there's many monsters with ice magic, so it's quite likely that it's some sort of gigantic ice lizard. Once again, I was faced with the fact that there were actual monsters within my domain.

“It's probably an ice lizard known as a Radoshishiruka. It's a type of magical beast with the magic to freeze anything it touches with its claws.”

“Mmm, it'll be nice if we can catch one and preserve its meat for summer supplies.”

Gunther made a joke, but unfortunately it didn't go over too well.

“No, we can't. Ice lizard claws contain poison, which will also attack whatever they freeze. We'll have to get rid of it before it attacks the village.”

I concluded that the monster sighted in the forest was an ice lizard, and the village's militia was to surround the forest with torches of fire. Ice lizards are weak against fire, and hate the heat. It's very strange that such a creature would come down from the snowy mountains during the summer, but after all it's difficult to understand the abnormal monster behavior during their active periods.

“Claudia and I will remain outside the forest. Don't forget to heat your

weapons up with fire before attacking them.”

After our preparations were finished, we headed for the forest. Five soldiers carried buckets of red hot charcoal, for the sake of another ten weapon wielding soldiers.

Even if they get injured against the ice lizard and are no longer able to go to Fort Jugfena, this number can be replaced by people from the village.

Gunther led them with spear in hand, and the soldiers entered the forest in droves. The trees gradually hid them from sight, and soon I couldn't even see their shadows anymore.

“It'll be good if they can finish this safely.....”

Paulo standing behind me muttered that under his breath. He hadn't entered the forest, and he had probably picked up on the anxiety of the villagers surrounding the forest with torches.

“If you're someone that believes in the path of military arts, then proudly believe in your companions, and wait for them without getting flustered.”

When Claudia chimed in with a calmer voice than usual, Paulo hurriedly straightened his back and turned to face the forest again. The silence caused the feeling of tension in the air to spread.

Then – the yelling of the soldiers could be heard from within the forest.

Everyone couldn't help but stare at the forest. A sense of urgency was transmitted along with their cries. Someone beside me audibly gulped.

Mixed in with the soldiers' screams, the sound of Gunther roaring resounded through the air. I could tell that they were struggling, and I clenched my sleeves tightly.

“.....Hey, isn't it getting colder?”

I wonder who it was that mentioned it first.

Imperceptibly, the air around us had begun to chill, and people were beginning to rub their arms as they detected the cold. Since it's summer,

everyone was wearing short sleeves, and they were trying to warm themselves up as the air had now gotten noticeably colder.

At this moment, a mysterious sound came from the forest.

It was a small sound that sounded like the cracking of a whip. When the sound began to repeat itself over and over again, the soldiers in the forest could be heard raising their voices in anger and confusion. Along with their screams, it sounded like hard objects were clashing with each other.

Something strange is happening in there. It was completely silent outside the forest. Including me, everyone's eyes were glued to the forest.

"L, look at that! The forest is freezing over!"

One of the villagers shouted that in panic. A commotion immediately began spreading.

When I looked at the direction the person who had shouted was pointing at, the trees were really freezing over, encased in ice. Slowly but surely, the area of ice was spreading. The area being frozen over just kept increasing. Finally, from the forest's direction, a voice could be heard saying the same thing.

"Enough magic to freeze over the entire forest, eh....."

The cold air from earlier must have been caused by this. Whether Gunther and the others were still alright, I was quite anxious. Everything must be frozen solid around the ice lizard.

The fact that they had leather armor instead of metal armor has actually helped out for once. If they had been wearing metal armor on top of their light summer clothing, they probably would have taken much more damage due to frostbite.

Even if screams were coming from the forest, all I could do was listen to them.

Then, Claudia suddenly jumped in front of me.

Before I could even ask why, a gigantic lizard that was knocking down

the trees in its path appeared in front of Claudia. The ice lizard had arrows stuck all over its body, and silver blood was flowing out of its injuries at a fast rate.

“Wah! It appeared!”

Behind us, the villagers were all screaming.

“Paulo-dono, get back!!”

At the same time that Paulo grabbed me and started retreating, prompted by Claudia’s voice, Claudia pulled out her sword from her waist. Her sword wasn’t very long, but she threw it with an amazing amount of force for such a slender wrist at the ice lizard.

Thud, the sword made a sound as it pierced the ice lizard’s head. However, the gigantic lizard still didn’t perish. It opened its huge mouth and revealed a set of fiendishly sharp teeth, and eyed the obstacle in front of it, Claudia.

“Claudia!!”

I couldn’t help but shout out her name.

Claudia’s long golden hair was beautifully spreading in the air. Its beauty seemed terribly out of place here, as I watched Claudia gracefully jumping and dodging. She escaped the jaws of the ice lizard, and with both hands, she stabbed her spear into the ice lizard’s neck.

A larger, duller sound rang out than when the sword had struck the ice lizard. Claudia had used her own weight and momentum to be able to pierce through the ice lizard entirely.

I snatched a torch from a villager standing close to me.

“Claudia-dono, fire!”

Despite the danger, Claudia grabbed the torch I threw at her with one hand. She heated up her spear stuck in the ice lizard with the torch.

The ice lizard was wriggling violently. From where the heated spear pierced it, it was spouting white smoke that seemed very much like water vapor.

“Keep going just like that!”

Gunther suddenly appeared from the forest, and swung down his broadsword in his right hand at the ice lizard’s neck.

Following him, more soldiers also appeared, surrounded the ice lizard, and swung their swords.

A pool of silver blood spread quickly around their feet.

Before long, the ice lizard finally stopped moving, and the soldiers finally collapsed down onto the ground.

The corpse of this ice lizard that was covered in a spear, arrows, swords, and its own blood, was quite a sublime sight to behold.

Chapter 35: Along The Way (Part 3)

I mobilized the remaining soldiers and had them dismember the ice lizard's corpse, and burn it a distance away from the village. According to their report, even its bones melted and nothing remained.

The soldiers that had done battle with it suffered some frostbite, but it wasn't too severe, and they were able to make gradual recoveries with application of warm water.

After a night's rest, as we were preparing to depart for Fort Jugfena early next morning, we saw several villagers heading our way.

Gunther moved slightly in front of me as if to protect me. Claudia, who hasn't been living in the Kaldia domain for that long, doesn't know the political situation here and the villagers' hostility towards me. Gunther remembers the birthday celebration incident here.

The people who had come were the village mayor, a man and a woman from the militia that I saw in the tent yesterday, and two women I didn't know. One of the women was still very young, and her facial features resembled the village mayor, so I figured that she was probably his daughter.

She's probably the one that was flogged along with the mayor for their complicity in inciting Ratoka to attack me. The other woman's probably the woman named Marley that had allowed Ratoka to live with her.

"What are you doing here!"

Since the village mayor had brought along the two people punished with him for that incident, all the soldiers were alert and on guard. Their hostility towards the mayor was evident, and he stopped right when they spoke up.

"Good morning. I would like to thank the domain lord-sama and everyone from the domain army for defeating the magical beast....."

"If that was really your intention, why'd you bring those two women along with you?"

In front of the soldiers that had clearly threatening attitudes, the two people from the militia were trembling in fear. However, the two women behind them were looking down at the ground and seemed calm.

Slowly and quietly, I reached for the hilt of the short sword in my waist. The people of Cyril village hate those of Kaldia blood more than any other village, and I don't know what they might attempt in a fit of passion.

"The child that was responsible for committing the crime of treason has already been executed. Why exactly have you appeared in front of my lord!"

The soldier that had called out the village mayor on why he came here was gripping his spear tightly with his hands. Gunther, and even Claudia who had a puzzled expression, both had their hands on their swords as well.

At that moment, the village mayor's daughter raised her face. She looked at the soldiers resolutely, and she even looked Gunther, Claudia, and me directly in the eyes. I don't know what she's thinking, and I looked back into her eyes to try and read her emotions. Our eyes met for only a little less than two seconds.

Suddenly, the girl kneeled and lowered her head.

"!?"

The soldiers were confused because they couldn't tell what the girl was trying to do. The other woman, as if imitating the girl, kneeled as well.

The village mayor and the two militia members silently moved next to them. The two women prostrated themselves before me.

"W, what's this....."

"Please listen, soldier-sama, these two....."

"We know very well our rudeness towards my lord. But, please, domain lord-sama, I beg you, forgive the two of us!"

Interrupting the village mayor, his daughter implored me directly in a

loud voice while still kneeling.

This could be considered very disrespectful. For commoners such as villagers, they're not supposed to directly address the nobility unless given permission. The girl might not know this however, and her voice sounded desperate for some reason, she sounded quite tragical.

What have you done, was the expression the mayor had on his face as he looked at the two of them. His daughter's actions seem to have been completely unexpected for the mayor. I could tell that he had a bitter taste in his mouth from his angry expression at his daughter deciding to do something on her own without his permission.

I looked at the two of them bowing their heads towards me. Why did they seem that desperate, I wonder. I couldn't see their expressions, and I couldn't even analyze their tone of voice as neither of them had said anything since the girl's outburst.

"Gunther,"

"You better not say something stupid."

".....but I didn't even say anything yet."

With a strained expression full of tension, Gunther interrupted what I was going to say. But, I'm really not the type to give orders without having thought things over carefully first.

"Gunther, capture those two women and bring them in front of me."

"Like I said..... Huh?"

"For their disrespect towards me just now, I said to capture them. They're people that were associated with an act of treason, I don't know what they could be plotting. Bring the two of them to me, and I'll punish them directly."

I suppressed myself so that my voice wouldn't shake while giving my orders, and it sounded terribly dispassionate and cold to me. I wonder if it's because a child's high-pitched voice carries well and is easy to hear, I noticed the two kneeling women's shoulders trembling.

Gunther looked at me with a dumbfounded look on his face. The soldiers surrounding me, the other two paralyzed villagers, everyone was looking at me with their mouths wide agape.

A gentle wind blew past the grassy field, shaking the blades of grass. Zaa, the sound of whistling wind surrounded us.

“What are you doing, Gunther. Your master is ordering you.”

While everyone was busy standing still looking at me, the next voice that spoke up was Claudia's. Her favorite spear was in her right hand, and her golden hair was fluttering in the breeze as she weaved through the soldiers.

Gunther hurriedly followed after her. The two of them held the two kneeling women's wrists behind their backs, restraining them as they rose up.

Claudia walked the girl in front of me without any hesitation. In comparison, Gunther couldn't hide his confusion as he followed behind Claudia with the other woman.

This time, the two women were brought in front of me and made to kneel again, but even so they haven't made a single sound of complaint.

“Did you know that you're guilty of being disrespectful towards a noble? The girl with the red hair, you may answer.”

When I indicated for the mayor's daughter to speak, her answer was an immediate no! And this time, her voice was shaking.

“What is it that you wanted me to know so badly, I wonder. You may speak briefly. I'll listen to it before I decide on your punishment. Raise your head.”

Even I felt that the words coming out of my mouth were so arrogant. However, by some miracle Claudia seemed to understand my true intentions, and she didn't use too much force on the girl, and tapped her gently on the shoulder to encourage her.

Although I had ostensibly called the two of them in front of me to

punish them, my true goal was to listen to what they wanted. Even if the two of them really did intend to do me harm instead of wanting to apologize, I have the strongest two people in my army holding them down, so that should reduce the risk to me.

It's reasonable that Claudia, who was raised as a noble, would understand what I'm doing faster than Gunther did. Even though Claudia normally behaves the way she does, at certain times it feels like there's such a gap in her abilities when she suddenly becomes competent like this.

The two women raised their heads, and looked me in the face. Then, their faces turned truly pale.

"....., Domain lord, sama....."

Their voices were shaking so badly, that I couldn't help but raise my eyebrow. They kept staring at me in a daze, their eyes were filled with fear, and they were biting their lips.

"-That's right. I'm Eliza Kaldia, your domain lord."

Surely to the two of them, they must have seen my father in me. With my straight black hair that reflected the sunlight, and my red eyes the color of blood, I'm the spitting image of my father after all.

Chapter 36: Along The Way (Part 4)

“- What’s the matter. To have committed such disrespect towards me, it must have been because you had something to beg of me.”

I wonder what it could be that they had to beg of me when they’ve already committed such a crime against me before. Being confronted with the villagers’ stupidity right in front of me, my mind wandered off from the two women kneeling in front of me and what they had to talk about.

Currently in the Kaldia domain, there’s no sacred shrines dedicated to the Ar Xia church. Since teaching the laws is considered the work of the church, and that villagers usually don’t hire teachers, I remembered that during my birthday celebration, it didn’t take place at a sacred shrine like it was supposed to, and villagers took the place of church officials instead.

By the way, all the church’s sacred shrines in Kaldia had been destroyed by my father. His reason was that “they were too luxurious.”

At that time, there was an economic crisis in the domain caused by father, so he made a law banning extravagance. The domain’s citizens originally had modest dwellings and lifestyles to begin with, while those from the church had better stone dwellings, and were able to afford slightly fancier clothing as well. He probably chased the church out because the people’s lives had been so poor for several years that they could barely keep the roofs over their heads, and the church was calling attention to it.

Using the excuse of rebuilding the domain, father had seized money, food, and people from the citizens, and the clergy from other domains were excluded from here so they couldn’t call attention to the terrible situation here, so education level is at a minimum. Basically if he kept outsiders out of the domain, the people here wouldn’t know any better. Well, this all happened fifteen years ago anyways.

In order to help the new citizens assimilate, it’ll be best if I can get the church to return. Ever since this kingdom was founded, it’s been

inseparable from the church.

“Please, I implore you. We’ll pay the fee for the incident that orphan caused, so please don’t take us away to become ‘laborers’.....!”

Interrupting my thoughts, I heard a heartrending cry. I blinked, snapping myself out of my thoughts, and looked back at the two women kneeling in front of me. What did she just say? Laborer.....?

“.....I see, so that’s what it was about. I understand.”

The girl’s shoulders were shaking badly. It seems that my voice came out colder than I thought it would. However, although I understood why the two of them seemed so desperate and sad, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of disappointment now.

Father would gleefully kill any citizens that committed crimes. On top of that, he would force entire villages to be responsible for criminals as well and have to pay “fees” or else be subjected to becoming a “laborer.”

“.....Could you stop thinking that I’m the same as the previous domain lord?”

I sentenced the two women to travel along with us to Fort Jugfena in order to atone for their disrespect. Claudia did a simple check on their bodies, and she didn’t find anything like poison or a weapon.

Since Fort Jugfena is likely to become a battlefield soon, the village mayor tried to appeal to me as I was going to be taking his only daughter along with me, but when I asked him if he wanted to take responsibility on her behalf instead, he quieted down.

And so, although it was still dim and early in the morning, we finally started heading for Fort Jugfena again.

“Have the two of them carry some of our things. Paulo, I’m putting you in charge of watching them.”

Today as well he was the novice soldier in charge of leading my horse’s reins, and I ordered him to go to the front and have the two women carry some light items.

Since my horse isn't going at a fast pace, I don't really need someone to pull the reins for me. Although he was leading my horse in name, it was more like all he was doing was keeping me company and chatting with me.

"Eh, ah, yes."

At receiving his sudden order, Paulo looked at Gunther for a moment. However, when he saw that Claudia next to him was nodding, he went over to the front without saying anything.

Again, Claudia was able to understand my true intentions quickly. Since the other soldiers have terrible attitudes towards the two women as they were associated with the orphan's act of treason, I figured I'd have Paulo accompany them instead, and it must have appealed to her code of chivalry, because her eyes seemed to be sparkling.

Because Claudia never hides her feelings, in a way, it's actually more fun to be with her than anyone else. She's not like a noble at all and allows herself to be swayed by her feelings too easily, but at the very least, there was no need to be on guard with her and look for hidden intentions.

But, taking Claudia's feelings into consideration, I won't be able to take the two women to the actual forefront of battle at Fort Jugfena. It can be said that it's a weak point if I want to use Claudia. Given the current situation, I can only leave things up to Claudia, and trust her to guard my life.

I simply had the two women carry some light items, since Claudia's an important person that I need to use until I'm able to safely return to Kaldia from Fort Jugfena. She probably understands that I can't simply just send any other soldier to look after them. After all, Claudia and I are the only other females.

We made camp tonight as we neared the border of my domain. Just like yesterday, the soldiers handily put up some tents, cooked some food with simple stoves, and put up a simple wooden fence around the area.

Because we're in the lake area, it's terribly muddy. The soldiers washed

their feet and shoes at the nearby lake, and hunted for some food in the surrounding forest.

I remained at the tents. As long as there's no urgent situation, it seems that the nobility are allowed to take it easy. Of course, the flip side of it is that nobles are supposed to work harder for the sake of everyone if there actually is an urgent situation.

Just like yesterday, I sat down where a cushion and cloth had been provided for me on the ground, and I played with a rock that I picked up that I felt resembled a chess piece from my previous life, and Claudia waiting beside me began to pace about restlessly.

When I followed her line of sight to outside the tent, it seems that the two women I had brought with us from Cyril village had lit up a fire in one of the stoves. They seemed to be much better at using the stoves than the soldiers, and it seemed like Claudia had something she wanted to say.

“.....Claudia-dono.”

“Ooh, do you need me to do something?”

“I would like some hot water, could I trouble you to get some for me?”

I implied that she could go over to the stove, and a joyful smile blossomed on Claudia's face. Since Gunther's also guarding the entrance to the tent, it's not much of a problem even if I send Claudia a slight ways off.

“I'll bring some to you right away!”

Claudia flew out of the tent with so much energy. When she returned later, it took a few seconds for her to realize that she had forgotten to bring me any water.

Chapter 37: Fort Jugfena

The next day, unfortunately the weather worsened, and we continued towards the Jugfena royal domain while it was drizzling. We couldn't tell the time because we couldn't see the sun, and we had to proceed carefully so as to not go in the wrong direction with this low visibility.

While everything was misty, we just kept following the path to the right, and we arrived in front of a forest that was much denser than the other ones in Kaldia. It was said that a primeval forest once covered this entire area, and what's left of it now has become known as the "Monster Forest." I could hear what sounded like the sounds of beasts and insects coming from the forest along with the sound of falling raindrops.

"This place gives off a bad feeling....."

That voice came from one of the soldiers. Maybe it's because of the rain, even though it was summer there was a chill in the air. The soldiers might all be tired as well, everyone kept marching on in complete silence.

"Gunther, raise our speed to an extent that we won't get lost again."

"Understood. I want to get out of here as quickly as possible too. Even being outside the Monster Forest, makes my heart nervous."

Even Gunther who was such a fearless person thought so, and this road had an eerie atmosphere to it. While holding on the the reins of my horse, I looked at the forest to my right. Due to the rain, its outline was dark and I couldn't see it clearly. Although there's still quite a distance to the forest, it felt like the Monster Forest was a looming presence, maybe it's because the forest takes up such a large portion of my field of vision.

Suddenly, I felt like within its grey shadows, a bloodstained red was spreading. When I blinked, it was gone already, I wonder if it was an optical illusion, since I couldn't see it anymore.

But while I was busy focusing on the forest, I heard a cheer from the soldiers in the front.

"I can see it! We've reached Fort Jugfena!"

At hearing that, all the soldiers cheered. On the other side of the drizzle, the shadow of the giant man made structure was vaguely asserting its presence.

As we got closer to it, I was gradually able to make out the contours and features of the gigantic fortress. Fort Jugfena, is the only place where people live in the Jugfena royal domain. Rain was drizzling down on the fort made of polished black stone and metal, and it had towers spaced uniformly apart with the Arxian flag on top of them, with walls taller than the Mansion of Golden Hills I live in. Unlike the castles in the royal capital, there was absolutely zero decorative elements, but I felt that its systematic nature seemed supremely magnificent.

The Kaldia army's soldiers had never left Kaldia before, and even Claudia as well though she should be used to the castles in the royal capital, they were all staring at the black iron fort with mouths wide agape. I was no exception. In front of this overwhelmingly beautiful fort, the Kaldia army proceeded while being fascinated by it like fools.

"Mm, Elena-dono, over there."

Claudia who seemed to have the vision of a wild beast was pointing to the bottom of the fort. Her eyesight was even good enough to find one speck of grain in the large kitchen.

"It's not Elena, it's Eliza."

"Did I get it wrong again..... I'm sorry. Please excuse me."

I shortened my usual correction of her as I had mostly given up already, and squinted at the place Claudia was pointing at. Since my horse was still proceeding along in the meantime, when we got a bit closer I was finally able to see what Claudia was pointing at.

"Are those..... the refugees' tents?"

Surrounding the fort, completely different from the tent I used, were rows of simple tents meant for use by soldiers. They were spread out around the side of the fort as far as I could see.

Even though it was raining, I could see people coming and going from

the tents, not minding the rain. Then I changed my line of sight to our objective, the fort that took us three days of marching to get here. We stopped in front of the fort's doors, and as my leading military commander, Gunther reported my arrival to the fort's gatekeeper. In front of me were gigantic wooden doors kept behind iron chain mesh, I could truly tell that this castle was intended to be a fortress.

Maybe the refugees can tell that Claudia and I are of higher status since we're on horses, their lines of sight were all on us. All they were doing was gawking at us, there wasn't much expression on their faces. There were those that kept staring at us silently, as well as those that lost interest and returned to their tents. They all seemed unhealthily skinny, I could tell that they all appeared to be exhausted and emaciated.

I'm sorry, but right now I'm not here to welcome you. I put what I had just seen away in a corner of my mind.

In the meantime, the gigantic door in front of me opened. Gunther gave the order for everyone to advance, and we slowly entered the castle in columns of marching soldiers. There was a row of soldiers on either side of us, leaving enough space for us to pass by between them. We passed them by as we entered the fort. The fort was brightly lit inside by torches, and we passed by some stables on the first floor where there was a wide space that many horses were resting at.

"Thank you very much for coming over, Viscountess Kaldia."

"I'm much obliged for your welcome. As promised, I've brought along fifty soldiers from the Kaldia army."

We were being guided by soldiers from the fort, and the knight that had been the messenger to the Kaldia domain the other day arrived to greet me. I suppose he might be the one in charge of being our liaison. Today, since he wasn't wearing a helmet and his hair was down, he seemed younger than before. If anything, I'd say that his current appearance matches his true age more. But, I don't have any idea what his age is.

"On behalf of my lord Earl Einsbark, thank you very much for your pure and noble knightly spirit."

The man knelt and greeted me in a special knightly pose and ceremonial manner. He basically had his right hand touching his left shoulder. As expected of an actual knight, his movements were elegant and graceful.

As for Claudia whose dream was to become a knight, her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she watched the knight carrying out his formal greeting. This is bad, this is her expression right before she loses control of herself.

“I’m sorry about the inconvenience even though we’ve just arrived, but I wonder if my soldiers can get some rest now. Since we unexpectedly had to deal with exterminating a magical beast on our way here, they’re a bit tired.”

“Of course.”

The knight issued instructions to the soldiers that had been guiding us, and my soldiers went up to the second floor with them.

Meanwhile, I ordered Claudia to bring those two women over here. Those two women that I brought along with me from Cyril village, when they first entered this stone and metal fortress, they were too frightened to even look at the refugees, and seemed to be at a loss for what to do. For now, I’m just going to say that they’re my and Claudia’s maids, and that tomorrow I’m going to have Claudia accompany them back to Cyril village.

“So, just for tonight, would it be alright to loan a room to these maids as well?”

“Ahh, there’s plenty of extra rooms. It’s no problem.”

The knight nodded at my second request, and then I continued speaking.

“I still haven’t heard your name yet. I apologize for not asking up until now.”

“I don’t mind. I thank you for the respect you’ve shown me. Allow me to introduce myself, I’m Ergnade Einsbark. I’m the leader of the 1st Cavalry Platoon at Fort Jugfena. Since I’m in charge of being the liaison with you

guys, I think we'll be getting to know each other very well. I'll be in your care."

.....Einsbark? This is an unexpected name that I'm hearing.

Since he had been a messenger knight, I thought that he would be just a low-ranking knight, but to think he was a military commander. What's more, since his last name is Einsbark, that means he's related to the earl that's the leader here. With such a high rank, he's to be our liaison?

I wonder what Earl Einsbark is up to, selecting such a person to be our liaison. Not knowing what that sly old fox, the cunning veteran knight Earl Einsbark could be planning or thinking, my habit of being on guard reared its ugly neck.

Chapter 38: True To One's Desires

Ergnade guided us to our rooms, and as soon as he carefully closed the door behind him and exited, Claudia couldn't contain her excitement anymore and jumped on top of a bed.

"Wah!?"

At Claudia's sudden, eccentric action, both of the women from Cyril village jumped. It was too sudden for them.

Claudia buried her face in the sheets, rolled around, and wrinkled the sheets. Stop, you're going to make a mess of my bed.....

"Ahh..... Being a knight, it's so dignified and beautiful!"

With her face still buried in the bed, Claudia made such a comment. I was amazed and speechless, and just looked at Claudia with a strange feeling. She really likes the idea of being a knight way too much.

".....You two, it seems that the room to the right of this one will be yours for tonight, so please stay there."

"Y, yes."

I don't know whether I should say the two women were amazed or frozen solid, but I ordered them to their room, and sighed deeply as I was now left alone with Claudia.

"Claudia-dono, your spear fell over."

"What!?"

Claudia, who seems to have returned to her senses, raised her face. At the same time, she saw her favorite spear that had fallen down onto the floor, then she saw me and my amazed expression, and she got off the bed, realizing the way she had been acting.

"S, sorry....."

"Please fix the sheets properly."

As I sat down on a chair in front of the desk by the window, I sighed

again as I was tired, and stretched. As expected, riding a horse for three days straight to get here with a six year old's body, I'm sore all over.

After I took a glance at Claudia to make sure that she was fixing the sheets, I looked outside the window. For defensive purposes, the window had iron bars. On the other side of the glass, I could see the ramparts that were considered the national boundaries. It's made basically the same way as this fort, and there was a gate that was currently shut on the tall rampart walls.

On the other side of the rampart, is the Densel Dukedom. This place is on the frontlines of defending our country, seeing this for myself, I felt some tension as well. Something might happen at any time, just as I was bracing myself –

“Nooo, why can't I get it nice and straight like the maids do!?”

Suddenly, Claudia's idiotic voice interrupted my thoughts. I couldn't help but collapse on the desk, losing the strength in my arms to prop myself up.

It seems that Claudia was struggling with the bed sheets, and because it wasn't going well, she was getting frustrated. Before she could rip the sheets, I hurriedly stopped her and told her it's fine. Claudia still seemed worked up and dissatisfied at the situation, and she turned and faced me, and spoke up seriously.

“Erin-dono, please let me remain here and guard you after all.”

“It's Eliza. No.”

“Sorry, I got it wrong again. I think it was a good idea to say that those two were our maids. But if I'm not here because I have to escort them back, who will Eliza-dono leave things up to here in the meantime?”

I wonder if it's because she came in contact with an actual knight, she's even more insistent than usual. However, it's useless even if she begs me with those puppy eyes of hers. As Claudia stared at me with those blue eyes of hers, resembling a cat, she tried to overwhelm me with her feelings.

“Of course I can leave things up to the soldiers, and I can take care of myself. Claudia-dono, you’re a guest that’s been entrusted to me by the Rolentsor family. You really shouldn’t be here at such a dangerous place. It’s the same for those two women as well. Since if they stay here they could be in danger, I’m requesting this of Claudia-dono.”

“.....I give up. Got it, I’m sorry. I’ve been too selfish.”

Claudia’s head was drooping down, and just like that she went and laid down on the bed. Because it was so rare to see her quiet like this, even though her being quiet was great for me, I couldn’t help but ask her a question.

“Claudia-dono, why are you so enchanted with the idea of being a knight?”

Like a spring, she suddenly bounced back up. A smile popped up on her face like she was blossoming, and she was looking at me with sparkling eyes. At the great change in her, I asked myself mentally if I had spoken prematurely.

“Thank you for asking, let me tell you!”

.....And my answer was, I had indeed been too hasty.

According to Claudia, who was actually acting somewhat embarrassed, she started from an episode in her early childhood about her having no talent in anything whatsoever, apart from martial arts and military arts, and wanting to be recognized by her immensely talented older brother.

Her prowess in battle was indeed strong, so with her abilities, she would have a place in Arxian society. Her academics were terrible and she wasn’t eligible to learn territory management as a girl that wasn’t likely to inherit, but she was treated equal to boys with regards to military arts. Claudia proudly said that her parents had a saying, if you have the free time to be sewing, you might as well be strengthening your spear skills instead, it’s considered normal in her family, although it’s still rather unusual for an Arxian girl to possess such high combat skills.

Her older brother, who was probably worried about Claudia’s lack of

interest in anything girl-like and her lack of self-confidence, seems to have told her that she had the talent to become an amazing knight. It seems that he used to be cold towards Claudia because his younger sister had been better with the spear than he was, but in the end he seems to have managed to swallow his pride and encourage his little sister. It was an interesting story in its own way, I listened to it in silence, only responding occasionally to let her know I was paying attention.

“My older brother is a splendid knight now! I admire him so much!”

Claudia’s eyes were starry like those of a maiden in love, it’s just that what she was dreaming of was running around a battlefield, becoming a knight. In front of her overflowing hopes and dreams, I could only give a small sigh.

“Come to think of it, Eliza-dono, don’t you have any?”

“Any what?”

Claudia’s cheerful face looked at me expectantly, and she asked me a question with no context at all. This time she didn’t get my name wrong, how rare.

“Do you have anything you’re aiming for?”

“Right now, I’m aiming to become a great domain lord.”

“That’s not what I mean..... Mmm.”

It seems that it wasn’t the answer she wanted to hear, and she furrowed her eyebrows as she was thinking.

“That’s, um..... Rather than what you want to be, is there something that you absolutely have to become?”

“?”

Claudia seemed to be trying her hardest to come up with the right words to say, but after not getting the response she wanted twice in a row, Claudia began clutching her head and muttering, trying to think of what to say.

“Um um um..... Uh, as an example, what does Eliza-dono want to do?”

“Want to do..... Right now, I want to help the new citizens adjust to their new village as soon as possible. After that, I want to get the church to return to the domain.....”

“Isn’t that part of your work as a domain lord?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But that’s not what I mean.....”

Uuu, her muttering had changed to whining. With her face between her hands and a silly expression on her face, moaning and whining, she looked ridiculous, ruining her appearance even though she was a beauty. It felt like a travesty upon my eyes, so I averted my eyes and looked outside the window.

“.....Other than things related to your domain, doesn’t Eliza-dono have anything you want to do?”

After a while, Claudia finally managed to think of something to say. Other than things related to my domain.....?

Mmm, as I went over the things I wanted to do in my head one by one, every one of them had to do with being a domain lord or being a noble. It was to the extent where I began admiring myself, for my lack of selfishness in not having anything I wanted to do for myself. Finally, Kamil’s face suddenly came to my mind, but I immediately got rid of him by shaking my head.

“There’s nothing.”

“There’s nothing?”

Claudia was seriously looking at me with an incredulous expression on her face. Wanting to get married to someone would be considered pretty ordinary, and among all the things that people wanted to do, for her that so single-mindedly wanted to become a knight, it might be a little hard for her to understand me.

“.....You don’t have any desires?”

“I don’t think that’s quite accurate, either.”

“Although I’m aiming to become a knight, I’d also like to eat boiled eggs until my stomach bursts, or be able to use magic like monsters can, I have plenty of wishes unrelated to me becoming a knight. Is there really nothing for you?”

I tried to think of something specific, but I was still unable to come up with anything. I shook my head, and Claudia scratched her head.

“Hmm, as I thought, you don’t have any desires.”

This time I didn’t deny it, and just shrugged. The fact that I’m not completely selfless, I know perfectly well myself.

I have a wish as well.

– I want to be forgiven. Someone, anyone, in any way, even though I don’t deserve it, can’t I be forgiven, I’ve always been wishing for it.

To have no desires, of course that’s not possible.

Chapter 39: Earl Einsbark

As I passed the time chatting with Claudia, having nothing else to do, after quite some time passed Ergnade invited us to dinner. During this time, the drizzle outside was gradually slowing, and outside the fort's windows, I was able to see the sun again. Although in the Kaldia domain, due to the Amon Nor Mountains blocking the sun, it gets dark quite early, but since to the east of Fort Jugfena is wide open plains, it's plenty bright even during dinnertime.

"Are you dissatisfied in any way with your room, Viscountess Kaldia?"

"There's no problems. Thank you very much."

"I see. It seems that everyone from the Kaldia army is liking their rooms as well. They're more disciplined than I would have expected. Usually, when we have armies from other domains coming here for the first time, they tend to complain about things here."

As we walked down the hallway together, Ergnade tried to make small chat, although he seemed unfamiliar with it. While I made the appropriate responses, Claudia following along behind us was staring at him happily. Although I'm not obsessed with being a knight or anything, somehow I felt like following her example and observed him closely.

He seemed slightly older than Margrave Molton, I wonder if he's about Gunther's age or so. Now that I look at him closer, his facial features, especially his nose, did indeed resemble Earl Einsbark's, who I saw at the House of Lords before. His muscular back seemed almost like a pillar to me.

Today he wasn't in ceremonial dress, but in knightly attire instead, which was full black. It seems that the colors assigned to Fort Jugfena by the king were black and silver, although the only silver I saw Ergnade wearing was the knight emblem embroidered onto his cloak.

".....Those black clothes look very sharp on you."

"Hm? Ahh. Indeed. I iron them every morning."

Even though I was just paying him a vague compliment, Ergnade answered me with a deadpan expression on his face as he touched his own cloak. Then he grinned, and said somewhat proudly, “doesn’t it look cool?”

He’s a bit mischievous, was my first impression of him.

As we arrived at the dining hall for nobles, and I saw the painting decorating it, it made me think of Earl Terejia’s residence in the royal capital. The floor was carpeted, there was wallpaper on the walls, and there was even a bright chandelier hanging from the ceiling. There were velvety cloth curtains hanging from the windows as well, hiding the iron bars from view.

In this dining hall, it was so ornate that it could cause one to forget that this was actually a fortress of black iron. The glittering hurts my eyes. Since the glare from the chandelier was annoying, I avoided looking at it as much as possible.

Several people were already seated at the long table in the dining hall, including Gunther at the farthest end who seemed frozen solid. At the seat of honor was Earl Einsbark, with two men that looked like his sons sitting next to him. Everyone was wearing black knightly attire similar to Ergnade, it felt almost like a funeral, was the thought that flashed into my head.

Although in actuality, Arxian funerals have white attire, not black, but I’m just recalling memories from my previous life.

“Ahh, thank you for coming, Viscountess Kaldia.”

Earl Einsbark sitting in the farthest back stood up and held out his hands in a welcoming manner. Although just like the first time I saw him, he had the face of a strong knight in the prime of life, this time he didn’t have a strict expression like the one he had at the House of Lords, but rather a soft smile much like Ergnade’s.

“I’m very grateful that you’ve brought fifty brave soldiers from Kaldia, so as a welcome, although it may not be much, I had this modest meal prepared for you. Please enjoy yourself.”

“I’m honored and deeply thankful for this feast that you’ve prepared for me.”

Earl Einsbark’s eyes were soft, almost as if he was looking at a grandchild. Ergnade guided me to a seat on the earl’s left, then guided Claudia to a seat as well before sitting down himself at a seat much farther down the table.

“In order for us to live on, forgive us for the lives we take for this meal. All sins and virtues shall be judged by the scales of Xia.”

Well, I suppose this is sort of a more formal version of “let us partake in this meal” from Japan. It seems that in the neighboring country right next to us, the typical prayer before meals is “we are deeply grateful to the gods for this meal today.” Since I wasn’t religious in my previous life, I’m deeply grateful myself that I wasn’t born in the neighboring country and have to say such a thing before every meal.

“I’m very sorry to bring this up right after asking the forgiveness of the gods, but is it alright for me to introduce the people here to you now?”

“Of course, no problem.”

As I nodded, Earl Einsbark pointed to the man sitting right next to him. His hair color was similar to Ergnade’s, albeit slightly greyer, and he was a middle-aged man that resembled the earl even more than Ergnade did. He nodded at me politely.

“This is Volmar. He’s my eldest son, and the commander of the cavalry troops at Fort Jugfena. Next,”

The man sitting next to Volmar had beautiful features, and smiled gently at me just like Earl Einsbark did. Compared to his family, he was the only one with delicate features, and I couldn’t help but think that he looked weaker.

“This is my second son, Wiegraf. Although he’s a knight as well, since he’s not that skilled at martial arts, he’s a military strategist. He looks so similar to my wife, I wonder if it’s because of that?”

Although he was laughing easily, I noticed that my jaw muscles had

stiffened up a bit unconsciously. It seemed like that parent and child could joke around with each other easily, and I remembered the way that Ergnade was being mischievous as he guided me here, so I relaxed slightly.

“Over there is Ergnade. He’s my third son, who cunningly contacted you before I did.”

“F, father.....”

“I’m just joking. I’ve heard that Earl Terejia has become the guardian of a certain child, so I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

As Earl Einsbark said so, he laughed happily, ha ha! At the same moment, his eldest son Volmar who had appeared straightlaced up until now, burst out into laughter. Wiegraf and Ergnade snickered as well.

At seeing them, this time, I relaxed myself completely. Claudia and Gunther who had also both been nervous and frozen up, had started laughing as well before I realized it.

I had been worried that the Einsbark family might be difficult to deal with, but they seem like quite the peaceful family. Although the neighboring country’s invasion was still on my mind, that I don’t seem to be despised here for being that evil villain’s daughter, I felt a bit of relief.

Chapter 40: The Black Iron Fortress (Part 1)

Gong..... an echoing loud noise shook my entire body. The bell in the central tower of this fort was being struck. I sleepily got up due to the sound while yawning, as the purpose of the bell was to wake everyone up.

There's no water clocks here at Fort Jugfena, and the tolling sound of the bell is meant to tell time instead. After all, manpower would be required to maintain a water clock. Since there's no maids or foot soldiers that are only required to do menial labor here, it would take too much to keep a water clock operational. The villages in Kaldia mainly use sundials rather than water clocks as well, but for the soldiers and knights, I think auditory information is probably more convenient for them than visual information.

The first time that I heard the bell ringing, it felt so loud and discomfoting that I had to plug up my ears, but I've gotten used to it quickly. Even I feel that it's convenient now.

It's been exactly seven days since I've arrived at Fort Jugfena.

I squinted through the rugged iron bars on the window at the rays of twilight shining through. Today's dawn sky seemed strangely red for some reason.

"Good morning, Viscountess Kaldia. Today, Earl Einsbark has granted permission for you to observe our training grounds."

When I finished dressing myself appropriately and left my room, a man sharply dressed in black knight attire was already waiting for me. In addition to being my liaison, it seems that he's also being my escort and guide, I've been seeing Ergnade and accompanying him together every day.

"Good morning to you, Ergnade-sama. Permission to observe, is it."

"Yes. The earl was wondering if you would like to see how we train our soldiers here."

“I see, I’m thankful for his concern.”

After seven days, Ergnade’s chatting with me has become quite informal. The first day I arrived, he was addressing me with an overly stuffy, formal version of “you,” but some time ago he’s stopped that and is now calling me “you” casually like when he first visited Kaldia as a messenger.

He had sharp eyes, but they would soften at the corners and crinkle up as he watched me in silence. I got the same feeling from Ergnade’s grey eyes as I did from Margrave Molton back at the royal capital. It felt like I was getting cold from it, so I blinked and gently averted my gaze.

We left the tower I was staying at and headed for the dining hall, where Gunther was waiting for me. On the other side of this tower, my domain’s soldiers were borrowing rooms in the barracks here, while I had been given a room in what was known as the “knight building.” Since the “knight building” is supposed to be a living space for nobles, the commoner soldiers basically never come here. As one of my domain’s soldiers, Gunther followed those customs as well, and he was waiting for me in front of the door on the fourth floor that led to the knight building.

“Good morning, Gunther. Thanks for your troubles today as well.”

“Good morning to you, my lord, and Ergnade-sama.”

As Gunther replied to my greeting, he glanced behind me, and almost as an afterthought he greeted Ergnade as well. Ergnade was following behind me with a face that basically said of course he should be greeted as well. I always eat at the dining hall for soldiers, and haven’t been to the place where the earl’s sons, the senior knights eat. I can’t determine with absolute certainty if Ergnade really has been assigned as my “escort,” but for him to accompany me here to the regular dining hall probably does mean something of the sort along those lines.

“Good morning, Gunther-dono.”

Ergnade made a short response to Gunther’s greeting. Exchanging simple greetings like this has been going on every morning while Claudia is absent, as she was currently escorting the two women from Cyril

village back to their homes.

After breakfast, Ergnade would help train me in using the spear. Since my usual instructor Claudia isn't here right now, at first I thought I'd get tips from Gunther again and have him watch over my training, but it seems that Ergnade must be bored just being my escort as he said he'd help me train as well. Since having a senior knight that's currently in active duty be my instructor is the best I could ask for, I bowed my head and accepted. Gunther's role has subsided to only overseeing my basic physical fitness and foundational training.

The spear skills that Ergnade was teaching me seemed to be a better fit for me, as Claudia's spear skills were highly technical, and were not a good fit for me as I was still a child lacking in body strength. Ergnade noticed this, and using Claudia's spear skills as a foundation, he trained me in spear skills that would be more fitting for me, especially as I might be using a spear on real opponents soon, unlike when I was training with Claudia. He emphasized attacking points that would cause the greatest amount of damage with my speartip.

Ergnade mentioned that Claudia's spear skills incorporated many elements from staff skills, and that these techniques had no wasteful movements to them and could definitely kill opponents.

Usually Ergnade would bring two wooden spears out from the armory for our practice, but today he had taken out two unfamiliar weapons instead.

"Viscountess Kaldia, I'm going to teach you some new moves today."

"New moves?"

"Yes, I'm going to teach you about halberds."

Ergnade placed the weapons on the ground, and told me to take a closer look. Regular spears were made of wooden shafts with a sharpened cone-shaped metal head attached, as it was a shape designed to pierce armor with. It basically takes advantage of length to stab enemies with, designed so that even regular soldiers with no knowledge of martial arts can kill enemy soldiers. It's commonly used by infantry soldiers.

In comparison, the spear-like weapon Ergnade had brought out was a bit shorter in length. The halberd was a spear with an axe blade attached to the spear tip, with a somewhat triangular shape and a double-edged blade on both sides of the spear. One was real and the other one was wooden, probably for practice purposes.

“Although it’s a bit difficult to use, but it’s a strong weapon once mastered. I’ve heard that the Kaldia army is mostly cavalry troops. Since this weapon works well both on horseback and on the ground, I think it’ll be good to learn.”

I see, I nodded as I passed the wooden halberd to him. It’s heavier as it comes equipped with an axe blade. What’s more, it shook a bit in my hands as gravity tugged down on its weight.

“.....It’s almost lunchtime, so let’s end here.”

I had already become tired to the point where I didn’t have the energy to speak up when Ergnade finally said that, but he barely seemed to be sweating even though it was summer and he seemed refreshed. I had to use muscles that I didn’t normally use in order to just control this new weapon, and just holding it without shaking used up so much of my energy.

As I tried to catch my breath somehow, just like Ergnade said, I heard a gong..... sound from the bell that indicated it was now noon

Chapter 41: The Black Iron Fortress (Part 2)

After I was able to get some rest and had lunch, Ergnade asked me if I wanted to go see the training grounds now. That's when I remembered his comment earlier this morning. Come to think of it, it seems that Earl Einsbark had given me permission to observe their training.

Currently, the Kaldia domain soldiers are also receiving training from the soldiers at Fort Jugfena. It's so that I, Gunther, Earl Einsbark, and the soldiers can all work together better with each other, and we're all getting as much training as possible before the Densel soldiers draw closer.

In the southernmost part of Fort Jugfena, there was a building that was almost like a giant box which was the training grounds for the knights and soldiers. Since I've been receiving my training in the open grounds, I haven't been there before.

".....Even though I didn't even request it, the fact that Earl Einsbark has given me permission to see the training grounds, is it because he wants me to see how my soldiers are doing?"

"Of course, that would be correct."

When I tentatively asked Ergnade to see if I could receive confirmation, he nodded without any hesitation. Gunther had a bemused expression on his face as he usually didn't see much of the roundabout way of conversation between nobles.

"Then, I suppose I'll have to go take a look."

I felt like it would only be disadvantageous if I said I wouldn't go, while Ergnade smiled ambiguously at my reply. It was as if he was smiling at a child making progress, or maybe it's just a smile he directs at all children. I gently shook my head and ignored his smile, let's end this topic here.

The black iron fortress's training ground was much more overwhelmingly rugged than I expected. I wonder if that's why Ergnade went to the trouble of showing it to me from the ground up. Since I

haven't really gotten close to here before, this is the first time that I'm seeing the imposing profoundness of this box-like structure up close. This place is much taller than the four towers located in the corners of the fort, and I couldn't help but raise my head and look at the ceiling, which caused me to almost trip and fall.

"Uh oh. Please be careful."

Ergnade had placed his hand on my back, supporting me, otherwise I would have hit my head against the stone floor.

".....I've shown you something unsightly."

Because I'd forgotten that I still had a child's body, I made a fool of myself just now. Embarrassment was easy to see from the expression on my face, and as if in response, Ergnade just grinned. I wonder if he's having fun at my expense..... as I thought about it, I got more and more embarrassed. Gunther didn't say anything and just looked at me with a half smile as well.

Although the training ground was lit up by lights inside, it was still dimmer than outside. It was built similar to an arena, and down in the center, soldiers were repeatedly practicing deploying in formations.

My domain's soldiers were wearing something metal on their hands, shins, and heads. It seems that it's equipment from twenty years ago that the fort had on hand that's been passed on to them as a gift to my troops, since nobody is using it now.

In order to improve the quality of my domain's troops, metal equipment will be required. It might be fine for them to use donated old equipment for the time being, but in order to maintain a cavalry squad in the future, the Kaldia domain is going to have to learn metal processing as well as deal with the increased maintenance costs.

I'm going to have to attract a skilled blacksmith to my domain as early as possible. However, right now making sure that public order remains stable after accepting so many refugees as new citizens is a more pressing matter.

“Viscountess Kaldia, what kinds of difficult things are you thinking about?”

I heard Ergnade’s voice, snapping me back to my senses, as he had already finished descending the stairs and was in the center of the training ground. Gunther was also staring at me in amazement.

“You seemed to be looking so seriously at the soldiers, almost like you were glaring..... Do you think the training is insufficient?”

“N, no. That wasn’t it.”

While inspecting their equipment, I had gotten sidetracked thinking about my own domain. I hurriedly shook my head and denied to him that I would think the training insufficient, while Ergnade merely tilted his head and remained silent.

“It, it’s..... because their movements have gotten so much better. I was wondering what type of training they’d gone through in order to polish their skills so much in so short a time.”

“Didn’t you come here to learn that? Let’s go, come on.”

Ergnade waved at me with a soft, wry smile. At the way he seemed, it triggered a vague memory in my brain. Although I wondered what it was, no matter how I parsed my memories, I couldn’t remember what it was.

As Ergnade held his hand out for me as I descended the stairs, ahh, I’ve seen something similar to this scene in my previous life, is what I realized. My previous life’s memories seem so far away now, I felt a fleeting sense of loneliness.

Before I realized it, my observation turned into training me on how to command, which continued until dinner time. Just like this morning, I was exhausted from everything, to the point where I felt like my head was spinning around when I finally was able to have dinner.

“Oi oi, you alright there, my lord?”

Gunther sitting next to me had a worried face as he shook me. I just sat there in a daze for a moment, until I finally noticed him and replied “I’m

alright,” and nodded slowly. It felt too tiring to talk very much.

“.....It doesn't seem like you're alright.”

Although he seemed relieved that I finally responded, he still didn't seem to believe me probably due to the look on my face, and he pinched my cheeks. Stop it, I slapped his hand away, and he dropped his hand away from me.

“I'm tired, can't you leave me alone.....”

“Well, that's obvious to see. Can you still walk to your bed? You look like you're about to fall asleep on your feet.”

“If she can't move, then I'll carry her there. No need to worry, Gunther-dono.”

Ergnade who was eating on my other side elegantly wiped his mouth with a napkin as he interjected himself into our conversation. I was starting to nod off at that point, and stopped paying attention to what Gunther and Ergnade were talking about anymore. While dazedly looking at their worried faces as they kept talking, I thought back to the memory that Ergnade triggered in me back at the training ground.

“.....Ah, mom and dad.”

It reminded me of my parents from my previous life, and I accidentally said it out loud.

Gunther and Ergnade's surprised faces was the last thing I saw as I lost my consciousness. I'm at my limit.

Falling asleep for the first time in this world in this manner, I could hear panicky voices around me, it felt like I was hearing both wonder and satisfaction.

Chapter 42: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Prologue)

One morning, I didn't hear the familiar low tolling sound of the bell. Kan, kan, I heard a high-pitched sound of metal being struck, and the sound was gradually increasing in volume. It was a daunting sound that enhanced tension, is what I thought. It must be a type of warning to inform us about something approaching.

When I opened my eyes, it was still dark inside my room. Outside the window, it was still a blurry dark blue sky. It's before dawn. The metallic sound was increasing in momentum, rather than stopping. I got off my bed with a buzzing sound inside me.

Just as I had taken off my nightclothes and was putting on my tunic, there was a hasty sounding knock on my door. Rather than a polite knock, it sounded much duller, almost like someone was swinging their fist against the door. It was the first time I've heard such a knock, I couldn't help but gulp.

"Viscountess Kaldia, it's me, Ergnade! Please open the door immediately if you're dressed!"

Ergnade who was usually calm was shouting anxiously from the other side of the door. It's someone I know, but I only felt slightly relieved.

"I'll be right there!"

As I hurriedly finished putting on my tunic and removed the bar from the door, Ergnade entered with great momentum. Even with the light from the torches in the corridor, it was still rather hazy inside my room.

"Listen, it's the Densel army. On the other side of the Great Plains, the Densel army has made their camp!"

"!!"

At the news of the Densel army making camp, I was so surprised that even though I knew it wouldn't be visible from here, I couldn't help but

look out the window. On the other side of this fort's walls, was the flat, wide Great Plains. I could only vaguely make it out.

"The draconis here detected their scents. We'll be sending out a reconnaissance unit once it's sunrise, and prepare for battle. Where's your battle gear?"

As he was saying so, Ergnade rummaged through my room without my permission. In a box in the corner of the room, Ergnade found what he just asked, as he went through all its contents.

"This it? Alright, put it on. Let's get going right away, Earl Einsbark is waiting for you."

As I nodded, I felt like I was having an out of body experience. There was a tense feeling in my stomach, and my voice felt like it was stuck in my throat. By the time that I finally understood the situation and got ahold of myself, Ergnade was carrying me off in the opposite direction from where we usually went with large strides.

There's still quite some time before it's dawn. The golden sun was just barely beginning to peek out from the direction of the Monster Forest, when Ergnade and I arrived at a room in the fort. It was a room that was sparsely decorated, just like the iron windows in it.

"Has she arrived?"

"Yes, she's here with me."

Ergnade let me off, and I staggered a few steps. Because I had been shaken a bit, I felt slightly dizzy still.

".....Are you alright, Viscountess Kaldia?"

"Y, yes. I'm fine."

Now that I no longer feel like I'm being spun around, I had no problem standing properly and bowing neatly. Earl Einsbark nodded as he seemed to check over my appearance, and motioned for me to take a seat over on the sofa. Ergnade and I both sat down across from Earl Einsbark. There was a table in between us, on which a map of the surrounding territory

was spread.

On the map, to the east of Fort Jugfena, in the middle of the Great Plains, there were toys that probably represented the enemy soldiers placed there. Also, there were pieces representing enemy forces to the north, in the Bandishia Plateau as well, although their intentions were currently unknown. This is probably about the Densel army unit that's chasing the Shiru tribe.

"We sent out a reconnaissance unit the moment that the draconis detected the Densel army's presence, but currently we only know that they've made camp there and are unsure of their exact numbers."

There was a tiny toy piece in Earl Einsbark's hand. He placed it next to the pieces on the Great Plain. It seems to represent the scout unit he sent out.

"The draconis were unexpectedly helpful in locating them this early."

Bastards, muttered Ergnade under his breath.

As I looked at the pieces on the map, I was impressed with how everything was. In the name of chasing down the rebel Shiru tribe, they've made camp all the way here and pincerd them. To chase less than 50 members of a nomadic tribe here, it's such a grand undertaking. Even Earl Einsbark seemed daunted.

At the very minimum, it seems there's at least 300 soldiers chasing the Shiru tribe. For any more troops than that to be deployed here and camping right next to our borders, it would be quite daring of them, basically an outright declaration of war.

Since the draconis were able to detect them, we were able to be on guard. So this represents the Densel army, I felt a terribly cold feeling as I stared at the pieces representing them.

".....It seems like the sun is up now."

Earl Einsbark happened to look out the window and made that comment. Just at that moment, someone knocked on the door to the room, and a knight entered after he was granted permission.

“Reporting in, the scout unit has returned! The Densel army numbers about 700, and it seems that they have siege engines in their camp!”

“Unbelievable, does Densel really intend to declare war on our country!?”

Ergnade stood up and shouted in anger. I looked at the map again. If Rindarl didn't unite together, there was no way that Densel alone would have declared war on Arxia. As I thought about what it probably meant, I looked up and saw Earl Einsbark looking at me as if he was seeing something interesting.

In the blink of an eye, he changed his focus away from me, and the earl stood up.

“Tell Volmar to have the soldiers lined up in front of the fort's walls.”

His voice was quite severe. I couldn't help but straighten my back.

“Yes!”

The soldier bowed and exited the room. A moment of silence filled the room.

“Viscountess Kaldia, prepare yourself and head to in front of the fort's walls with Ergnade. If you have anything to tell me about your army first, I'll listen to it now.”

“There's nothing.”

Earl Einsbark nodded once, sighed heavily, and left the room.

War is now imminent, a stone's throw away from becoming reality. Although I was tense to the point of clutching my fists, I felt no elation at all, nor did I feel anything like fear yet. As I confirmed to myself how surprisingly calm I was, I nodded to myself.

– At last, this day has come. It finally happened on the morning of the 21st day since I've come to Fort Jugfena.

Chapter 43: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 1)

The soldiers lined up in front of the fort walls silently checked their own equipment. Among the feeling of heavy tension, I kept staring at a map in my hands of the surrounding territory.

The role given to the Kaldia army in the upcoming battle on the plains was defending the left wing formation, and to guide the Shiru tribe back to the fort safely before their pursuers arrived. The left wing formation consists mostly of a dense formation of spear infantry, and their main role was to ambush the Shiru tribe's pursuers. In addition, a cavalry unit would head eastward through the Amon Nor Mountains towards the Bandishia plateau. It's to help, and guide the Shiru tribe. They've been included in the refugees that we've decided to accept. For that reason, we have to go to the trouble of guiding them.

The refugees currently at the fort are farmers, and also culturally similar to what's considered normal in Arxia. If I can acquire the refugees' leaders, the Shiru tribe, safely without incident, they'll become indebted to me for shielding them from the pursuit of Densel which represents the Rindarl Union.

In the name of protecting the refugees from persecution, the House of Lords has decreed that Arxia shall defend our fellow believers of the Ar Xia faith, and save any fellow believers that are under attack from other countries.

Because he knows that very well, that's why Earl Einsbark issued the order for the troops to move out.

I thought it was unlikely that Densel would have expected us to shield and come to the aid of the Shiru tribe, but judging from the amount of troops they have, there's no way they would have prepared so many troops just to chase the Shiru tribe. It's made rather obvious since there's no way they would need siege weapons to deal with the Shiru tribe. What's more, they even have the Shiru tribe right in front of them and

pincered.

“My lord, here, your sword.”

I didn't realize that someone was next to me, I raised my face in response when I heard myself being called in a soft voice. When I looked up, I saw Gunther holding a shortsword out to me.

“.....Oh, uhhh. My bad, Gunther.”

I hurriedly received the sword from him, folded up my map and put it away in my waist pouch. I sheathed the shortsword and attached it to my belt. Since I already had a spear prepared standing next to me, I had completely forgotten to equip myself with a sword as well. I must have been too nervous.

Although there will be actual military operations going on, this time the main role of the Kaldia army isn't primarily focused on combat. But even so, the situation could always change at any time on the battlefield, and both for self-defense and to lead my army, I need a sword. I mounted my horse and began directing my troops with the sword as we marched.

“Oh ho, you're in the regular battle garb for nobles. When on my lord, it's quite something to see.”

“Since you're a soldier, this must seem like a mockery to you.”

“I think all this looks just fine on my lord.”

Gunther was being even more overly familiar and jokingly bantering with me than usual, I realized it myself and felt how out of character it was. I'm about to be on a battlefield. When that thought came to my mind, my heart that had remained calm up until now starting suddenly beating fast. In order to slow down my rapid heartbeats, I consciously took deep breaths.

“Sorry, Gunther.”

“.....About what. If it's about the sword, I already heard it.”

This is my first battle with me leading my army. Since I'm their leader, I can't allow myself to stiffen up and be overcome with tension. I should be

thankful to Gunther for overstepping the boundaries between us with his daring words. It was good for relieving the tension, and taking my mind off that I was going into battle.

And so I just kept watching Gunther's back as he left my side and returned to leading the marching troops. He's really someone that doesn't spoil or go easy on me at all..... Indeed, for the domain lord who's just a child to not flinch on the battlefield, it's probably something necessary.

In the meantime, I heard a voice order "Form columns!" and the soldiers from Fort Jugfena who were all equipped for battle organized themselves standing neatly, making clanking sounds.

"Are all preparations ready?"

Volmar who was in front of the troops, glanced around at everyone as he raised his voice. Even though his voice wasn't overly loud, it carried well, just like his father Earl Einsbark's voice.

All the soldiers and knights saluted him.

He briefly informed the troops what I already knew, that the Densel army was right upon our doorstep, and to prepare for battle with the goal of protecting the Shiru tribe. When the soldiers responded affirmatively, Volmar stepped down, and in his place Wieggraf stepped forward.

"The infantry and cavalry are to create a camp outside the castle walls. The center formation shall consist of the 1st and 4th Cavalry Platoons, as well as Igor's squad, the right wing shall be the 2nd Cavalry Platoon and the rescue squad, while the left wing shall be the Franks squad and the Kaldia domain army. All archers shall man the castle walls. Averin squad, please take charge of the fort's defense and protection. The 3rd Cavalry Platoon is acting as a detached force and has already moved out."

The 3rd Cavalry Platoon that he just mentioned is probably the unit that's meant to guide the Shiru tribe. Not counting the archers and the single squad we're leaving behind to defend the fort, our battle strength is approximately 450 troops. While it's quite a difference to overcome compared to the enemy's 700 troops, it's not so unfavorable that we wouldn't be able to beat the Densel army.

“Listen up, our primary objective is the protection of the Shiru tribe, not the eradication or retreat of the Densel army.”

The overall plan was to first march the army close to the Densel army's camp, both as a threat and to directly inquire as to the meaning of their advancing army. If battle is unavoidable, the primary tactical objective is to be the destruction of their siege weapons.

The 3rd Cavalry Platoon is to be responsible for meeting up with the Shiru tribe, and the Kaldia army is to become a detached force as well to guard the Shiru tribe once that happens, and the knights and soldiers are to retreat and battle defensively when contact is made.

“A strategy based on retreating may be difficult to accept, but based on the situation I believe it's not unreasonable. Don't turn your backs on the enemy, and make absolutely certain to not break formation while retreating.”

As the strategist Wiegraf personally informed all soldiers of our battle strategy, I felt like I could feel all the soldiers holding their breaths.

– Come to think of it, Densel troops haven't been so close to Fort Jugfena since the battle that occurred here seventeen years ago. Although I had learned that piece of military history from Mrs. Marshan, and Earl Terejia had hammered the neighboring country's politics and aggressive stance against us into me, there had always been a part of me inside that had put it away in a corner of my mind until I confronted and confirmed it for myself. Fort Jugfena's soldiers are well trained, and probably most of them are veterans that have experienced actual combat.

– But as for the Kaldia domain's troops, it felt like there was a creeping sense of anxiety. More than half of my troops have never experienced actual battle before.

Chapter 44: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 2)

Just like the neighboring countries, Arxia uses a conscription system to recruit soldiers, so most soldiers would originally be farmers that had only used hoes and plows up to now. In truth, the Kaldia army is mostly agricultural as well, as even the enlisted soldiers will have one month off each year to go back to their hometown and help with farming or the harvest, and they're also the ones in charge of growing wheat on the land under direct control.

That's why, it's not considered unusual for more than half of my soldiers to have never experienced actual battle.

I shook my head a little to dispel the anxiety that was threatening to invade me.

In my previous life, war had nothing to do with me, the concept of people killing each other on a battlefield had only seemed like a fantasy up until now. It's still getting through my head that this is all real, awareness is setting in that my current reality isn't quite so sweet.

I chewed lightly on the insides of my cheeks, and used the pain to discipline myself. Maybe it's because of the pain, it felt like I could organize my feelings faster than usual. I straightened my back as I rode my horse. Now that I was at an adult's eye level, I could see the knights clad in black on the other side of the soldiers.

"Eliza-dono!"

Among the soldiers trickling out through the castle gate, Ergnade came running up to me.

"Please be careful out there, Eliza-dono. I shall pray that the god Xia keeps you safe."

"You take care as well. Your role is probably more dangerous than mine."

After all, he's in the center formation. On top of that, if battle starts, his role is to attack and pierce the enemy formation. It's a much more dangerous job than mine.

Ergnade smiled softly, and stroked my hair without messing it up.

"I'm fine. I, and the people around me, we're all prepared for death. However, I have no intention of dying in such a small skirmish."

I didn't say anything else, and I just kept staring at his face, to the extent of burning it into my mind. He finally struck his chest, really forcefully.

".....Take care."

This moment finally stopped with great difficulty, and for a moment, Ergnade's smile seemed to get deeper as he left.

The soldiers quickly got into formation outside the fort's walls. It's to have the Densel army pay attention to us, is what our leader Earl Einsbark said to do. On the battlefield, the side with more information has the advantage. It seems that manipulating information so that the other side only knows what you want them to know is one of the basics.

"Everyone, advance!"

At Volmar's command, heavy drumbeats began sounding in a steady rhythm. In accordance with its beat, the soldiers advanced.

While being surrounded by soldiers, even though I knew it was out of place, I was impressed with the marching.

During my birthday celebration march, I had kept thinking that I wanted to do it like a marching band, and as expected, thanks to the drumbeats, it felt like the soldiers were able to march much more in unison with each other. Even though my army had also been training since they'd come here, it seems that they have no sense of rhythm at all. Because the terrain here is all flat, it's perfect for charging, and it probably won't be too hard to hear the drums within a 200 meter distance or so.

Before long, we arrived at the Densel army's campground. Their 700 troops were already lined up in a dense mass waiting for us.

“.....?”

But the closer we approached to them, the more I felt that something was off. I squinted to try and see things better, and maybe my expression gave it away as well, Gunther who was standing next to me asked what was the matter.

“I don't know why, but..... Something seems strange about the enemy. It might just be my imagination.”

“Ahh? Hang on a second.”

Although I was unsure of what my feeling was, Gunther glared over at the enemy formation and thought for a moment in silence, then he suddenly raised his voice hurriedly.

“Oi, there's no horses in the enemy ranks. On top of that, most of their troops' heads seem to be fluttering in a funny manner.”

When I heard that their heads were fluttering, the memory of a scarecrow from my previous life suddenly entered my mind. Whenever the wind blew against it, it would begin to flutter. What I thought next was, what a convenient thing to remember at this point in time.

“.....This is probably a decoy.”

“What? Who, who's the fastest in our army!”

When Gunther bellowed at the soldiers behind him, my army all stopped in surprise and shock. As the soldiers froze up and had thinking expressions on their faces, one skinny arm rose up from among them.

“Yes! I'm quite confident in my speed and everyone says I'm the fastest!”

The one who stepped out from among the troops as he said so, was the soldier in training, Paulo, who had the role of leading my horse when we were on our way to Fort Jugfena.

“Alright, then I'm giving you an order. Head directly for the 1st Cavalry

Platoon in the center formation, and give their leader Ergnade the message that ‘The enemy army seems strange. There’s no horses present, and the enemy soldiers look like props.’”

“What!? Sending someone like me as a messenger to the knights!?”

Paulo raised his voice and he was wide-eyed in surprise, but maybe it’s because he knows the urgency of the situation, he left immediately at top speed. Watching him go, I felt like he wasn’t bragging at all when he said that he was the fastest.

“What’s the matter, Viscountess Kaldia?”

It’s probably because they were wondering why the Kaldia army suddenly stopped marching, the vice captain of the Franks squad traveling with us in the left wing came over on horseback to inquire.

He’s a soldier that’s rather advanced in years with a white mustache and beard, and rather than fit, it could be said that he’s more plump.

“Something’s strange about the Densel army, I believe that it could be a decoy.”

There’s no horses, and the enemy soldiers’ heads were shaking unsteadily in the wind, much like scarecrows would. The vice captain listened to my explanation as he stroked his beard, but when I finished and requested that he report the situation to his captain, he began chuckling.

“What.....”

When the vice captain started suddenly laughing despite the tense situation, Gunther was struck speechless. He kept laughing without regards to the tension.

“Viscountess Kaldia, you’re really such an adorable child. You remind me of my grandson.”

“Huh?”

The vice captain has gone off on a tangent that I don’t understand at all.

I couldn’t help but tilt my head in confusion, while the vice captain

turned to Gunther and kept talking with a joyful expression on his face.

“When being mixed in with only adults in a place like this, children will usually want to say things that make them stand out. You don’t have to take them so seriously.”

What’s with this guy.

At his overly nonchalant attitude, Gunther and I were frozen in astonishment for quite a long time.

Chapter 45: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 3)

“.....If you have the time to make light of this situation, then hurry up and go report to your captain already.”

Gunther finally managed to clear his throat and say something, I could easily tell that he was completely exasperated with and quite angry at the vice captain.

The white-bearded vice captain only tilted his head slightly, and without saying anything, rode his horse unhurriedly back to his squad. Although he did stop by the squad captain to say something, judging by their behavior it seems that they won't be taking my orders.

I had ordered the vice captain to report on my analysis of the situation to his captain. Although I don't have a specific position at Fort Jugfena, I'm still an Arxian noble, no matter if this is Fort Jugfena or even Densel land.

“.....My lord, when we return to the fort, shall I submit a formal complaint against that senile old geezer?”

“Do as you like.”

It was incredibly easy to see that Gunther was in a very foul mood due to what had just happened. I thought back to the time last year when I had just arrived at the barracks under Gunther's care. I was someone he wanted to kill. In a turn of events, he's now serving right beside me and protecting me. I can't even begin to describe just how much people's hearts can change.

– Maybe, if I had given them a chance, they could have become good people as well. The family that I killed.

I decided to get rid of the idea that they could possibly have changed, and seal the thought away in my mind. I had already decided long ago that it wouldn't happen, when I made the decision to get rid of them.

.....Besides, now's not the time to think about such things. Even though I was clenching my teeth, I noticed a rumbling sound that didn't seem like it was caused by my teeth grinding.

".....Gunther, do you hear something?"

"What is it this time? I'm not as young as my lord is, my eyes and ears aren't as good as yours....."

He's still in his upper twenties, and he's already claiming age..... But even so, he concentrated on listening for sounds without saying anything else.

".....Is this the sound of horse hooves?"

"Can you tell what direction it's coming from, Gunther?"

"How would I know, do you think I'm a beast or something, you stupid brat?"

I'll ignore for now the fact that Gunther slipped back to his old foul-mouthed habits, given the situation at hand. It's not like I have anyone else that would take orders from me. But anyways, it seems that he's finally lost his patience with me because he thought I was treating him like he had the senses of a beast, and he's gone back to his more familiar way of talking to me. Although we've been together quite a long time as he's been both my teacher and my subordinate, I never would have thought that I'd be learning more about his personality in such a time and location.

"If it was Claudia, I think it would be easy for her."

"Don't lump me together with that little girl."

Well, that's true, I nodded in acknowledgement, and kept listening for sounds. The rumbling sounds were getting closer to us, and now I could tell for certain that it was definitely the sound of horse hooves. But, I couldn't really tell what direction the sounds were coming from.

"My lord-!"

Suddenly, Paulo came running back, having returned after I sent him off

as a messenger to the central formation. Even though he's only a soldier in training, he seems to be quite fit, as he's not even short of breath.

"You're really so fast."

"Thank you for the compliment. Um, Ergnade-sama said that he would like for my lord to come see him personally in the center formation."

At hearing Paulo's message from Ergnade, I furrowed my eyebrows. He wants me to leave my army for the time being?

".....Got it, I'll go."

Well, if he wants me to come to him then I must go. His rank here at the fort, and on the battlefield, is higher than mine. The fastest method is for me to go there by myself on horseback.

"Gunther, take command for the time being. Paulo, get on and ride behind me. I'm going to take you along as a messenger soldier."

"Whawhat, me ride my lord's horse?"

"Hurry up already."

Paulo is one of the soldiers in training to become a cavalry soldier in the future. There's no way that he'd have been allowed to lead my horse previously otherwise.

He still seemed lost so I glared at him, and he finally hurriedly but smoothly jumped on behind me.

There seems to be a state of confusion in the center formation, the soldiers all seemed to be terribly nervous about something. The atmosphere was even heavier than when we were departing from the fort.

"Ergnade-sama, I heard that you called for me?"

"Ahh, Viscountess Kaldia. I'm glad that you came over immediately."

He brought his horse next to mine, and with an excuse me, he suddenly picked me up and plopped me on his horse. I was shocked at what he was suddenly doing, but from above my head, I heard him saying in a tiny voice that this was so information wouldn't leak.

Paulo suddenly had his hands full, controlling my horse by himself. He looked like how I did before my birthday celebration, all nervous on the horse.

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s nothing, anyways, what did you want to say?”

“The right wing has changed direction, and is now proceeding to deploy southwest. Just earlier we heard the sound of many horse hooves. There must be a large group of cavalry troops nearby. When I received your report, I wondered if the Densel army was up to a daring plan of some sort.”

We had headed directly east from Fort Jugfena to get here, so to be deploying our right wing southwest from here means that he’s worried about the enemy army invading our country from south of here. The elevation gets lower around here as it gets farther south. Because it can get quite sloped in certain areas, it may be quite difficult to find the Densel army immediately if they did take such a southern route. If the Densel army really has slipped west of us, the southern route is the most likely way they took.

Although we left some troops to defend Fort Jugfena and there’s the moat and gate, if they sent their full forces they could definitely overcome it. Even the soldiers that are usually on lookout are participating in the expedition today, the military presence currently at the fort is minimal.

However, to take the southern route to the fort, they would also have to go through the Monster Forest filled with all sorts of magical beasts. That’s why we hadn’t been on guard for them taking the southern route.

To safely go through that forest, it’s estimated that at least ten thousand soldiers would have been required.

Chapter 46: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 4)

“I can’t get a good read on the enemy’s intentions. I think the Densel army must have realized that we left Fort Jugfena..... But as for where they went after departing from their camp and leaving decoy scarecrows behind.....”

“Indeed, it feels like they’re plotting something.”

In fact, I can’t think that it could be anything other than some sort of trap. We chatted while trying to get a good look at the Great Plains where their camp was, and Ergnade agreed with me that it could be some sort of trap.

“.....I’ll command the knights and go inspect their camp. Everyone else, be on standby here.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to be doing nothing here while we still don’t know the enemy’s intention?”

“That’s indeed the case, but we’re currently at the Great Plains with a wide view of everything around us. It should still be safe to just approach the enemy camp. You should return now to the left wing formation, and proceed with the original plan of having your domain’s army be in charge of protecting the Shiru tribe from any attackers on their tail once they are located. Could I ask you to relay the current situation to the Franks squad captain as well?”

When I heard him mention the Franks squad, bitter feelings towards the vice captain of the Franks squad surged up within me as I recalled my recent encounter with him. There’s no point in passing along any messages to someone that won’t listen to you.

.....Him ignoring my orders in that situation, is a serious offense that will have to be taken care of when all of this is over. At the very least, he can be charged with disrespect towards a noble, I wonder if that white-bearded vice captain will still be able to retain his position at the fort

after that.

“I understand.”

I swallowed down my feelings and nodded. Then, I suddenly felt like I was floating again as Ergnade picked me up once more.

“Good girl. Take care of yourself.”

He whispered that to me in a very kindly manner as he dropped me off back onto my horse. And so, once again I was now sitting in front of Paulo, the novice soldier, who had been struggling with controlling my horse by himself.

I hurriedly took the reins as my horse neighed and reared slightly. As I took control and had my horse start heading back, I took a peek back in Ergnade's direction.

He was nowhere to be seen already.

I headed for the Franks squad's vanguard. Since the center formation's troops had stopped moving, it seems like the other wings' troops were slightly confused as to what was going on.

“Is the Franks squad captain here?”

Their vice captain had just come over to my army earlier, so I figured that their captain would most likely be leading their vanguard, but once again it was the white-bearded vice captain that came up to greet me. The vice captain smiled at me, and asked, “what's the matter?”

“It's an order from Ergnade-sama, to stop marching your troops. The entire army is to be on standby for the time being. Anyways, where's the captain?”

“If you're asking for the captain, he just headed over to the Kaldia army.”

“Wha?”

Because I heard something so unexpected, I couldn't help but respond in an embarrassing fashion. What exactly would the Franks squad captain want with my army?

I saw a glimmer of malice in the vice captain's smile.

"Just earlier, our captain noticed Viscountess Kaldia heading off somewhere. Since we can't have an army without a commander, the captain headed over there to be the acting commander in your place. After all, it's quite well-known that the Kaldia army is such a low grade, disorganized army that it doesn't even have military ranks."

"....."

With a child as his opponent, he was gleefully saying such base things with clear malice, not even trying to hide his intentions. Faced with his vileness, I could only feel that I don't want to deal with him for any longer than I have to.

"I think our army's definitely a grade above from being under incompetent leadership that can't even accurately assess the situation on a battlefield."

Paulo who was sitting behind me suddenly butted in with his comment. It was really sudden and he said it quite forcefully.

The white-bearded vice captain's detestable smile finally disappeared.

"What.....?"

"Underestimating someone just because she's a child, having a dumb brain, and the bad taste of making fun of nobility, I think it's wonderful that there's nobody like you in the Kaldia army."

The things I wanted to say to the vice captain, Paulo said for me without worrying about any consequences, cheering me up greatly. It might be that he's too tense from the possibility of encountering battle for the first time and he's forgotten his place.

I didn't feel like accompanying the vice captain whose face was turning red for any longer, and I turned my horse around to leave. As my horse started galloping, it was a simple matter to put a lot of distance between me and the vice captain in a short amount of time.

The vice captain, who had been quite slow to react, raised his arm up

for some reason, which I didn't see. Well, I would have been too annoyed to consider thinking about what he could have meant with that anyways.

Well then, I wonder what my army's been doing. According to the vice captain, his captain should be with my army currently. I wonder what kind of person the captain will be, why don't I see for myself.

"I'm really so sorry, I arbitrarily interrupted my lord in the middle of your conversation."

As we left the Franks squad, Paulo sitting behind me apologized for his rudeness. Since I had found what he was saying hilarious, it had completely removed all my tension.

"It's fine. I was feeling like my ears were getting dirty just from listening to his filth."

As we continued on our way, Paulo laughed raucously.

"So that's what my lord was thinking. As I thought, you seem even more mature than I am."

When I returned to my army, my army was marching onwards, while I could hear Gunther angrily bellowing at someone.

"Like I said, don't just selfishly decide on your own to take charge! Viscountess Kaldia personally said that I could take command here!"

"What's the fuss about, Gunther?"

As I covered my ears slightly to shield them from Gunther's powerful shouting, I called out to Gunther.

".....Oh, ahh, my lord. Perfect timing. Could you get rid of this guy?"

When Gunther turned around and looked at me, I could see that he had a really frustrated expression. Since Gunther reaches boiling point quite easily and is prone to using his fists when he gets angry, he's really showing quite a lot of self restraint. It must be because of the rank of who he's dealing with.

"Ahh, Viscountess Kaldia. I see that you've returned, welcome back."

Standing next to a frowning Gunther was someone who spoke up in an overly cheerful voice that seemed terribly out of place on the battlefield. Looking up at him, I saw a middle-aged, well-built man with a face that reminded me of a reptile's. He must be the captain of the Franks squad.

“.....Gunther, there's an order from Ergnade-sama to have the troops stop marching. The entire army is to be on standby.”

I ignored the flowery language from the captain and directly gave Gunther an order instead, and Gunther sighed, saying finally as he took out his sword and raised it to give his orders. The captain's eyeballs were moving about in all directions as he watched us.

“Stop the marching!”

All my soldiers immediately stopped marching. After all, the Kaldia army is quite small. One of the benefits though, is that commanding them is quite simple.

The captain who had come here on the pretext of taking command because of the lack of command ability in the Kaldia army, had quite a bored expression on his face as he watched us.

Chapter 47: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 5)

Maybe it's because Paulo knew how tainted I felt from having to deal with the vice captain, he spoke up for me and told the captain "I think you can go back now."

"There's a message from Ergnade-sama for you. The knights will be taking charge of scouting the enemy camp, and the rest of the army is to remain on standby. We're still to meet up with the Shiru tribe and make sure to protect them, but since we don't know when we'll meet up, we're to be on guard."

"That's what's going on?" was the captain's response, and he hurriedly went back towards his own Franks squad after taking a good look in their direction. Half of his squad had already stopped marching due to receiving the order from the center formation and seemed to be looking over here at us, while the other half was still marching onwards.

".....Before making comments about command ability in other armies, learn how to manage your own squad."

Gunther insulted the captain while I watched silently as he drew a line across his neck with his thumb, as the captain was running off, shouting "stop marching, you idiots!"

"Well, that's how it is."

Gunther shrugged and turned around, and we headed back for our army that was lined up in neat and orderly lines. Originally though, we had expected that battle should have begun already at this point in time. It's just a question of when we're going to meet up with the Shiru tribe.

We remained on guard at our current location for approximately one hour. Nothing had happened during that time and the plains were eerily silent, when we finally heard something abuzz from behind us.

"What's going on?"

Gunther raised his voice, trying to figure out exactly what was happening. A soldier from the farthest column behind us answered him.

“My lord! There’s clouds of dust rising from behind us!”

At that same moment, I could hear what sounded like battle cries from the center formation’s army. Is it an enemy attack? It couldn’t be, from behind us?

“My lord, please look at that!”

Paulo grabbed my shoulder. When I looked in the direction he was pointing, what I saw was black smoke rising from one of the tents in the back of the enemy camp.

“.....Fire?”

I didn’t have a chance to think about it for long. Gunther was already raising his voice again.

“Oi, they’re coming here!”

The soldiers immediately stopped making a fuss, which was replaced by a feeling of high tension instead. Northeast of us, horses were kicking up quite a lot of dust. The soldiers in front of the horses had the flag of Fort Jugfena.

“Raise our flags!!!”

It was the 3rd Cavalry Platoon whose role was to guide the Shiru tribe here that was approaching us rapidly, and my army raised their flags as well. From our side, I heard “take your positions!” as well. The Franks squad was hurriedly fixing their crooked formation, and organizing themselves into a dense formation of spear infantry.

The Shiru tribe and the 3rd Cavalry Platoon which consisted of knighted nobility were approaching us without reducing their speed at all. From what I could see, there were many men running on foot, followed by children on horseback. There were two to three children on each horse. One of their leaders who was holding a flag stopped in front of me, and asked, “would you happen to be Viscountess Kaldia?” I nodded saying I

was, and he saluted me and began giving me a concise report of what happened with the detached force.

“About the Shiru tribe, there’s overwhelmingly many more of them than we expected. They are the remnants of the Shiru tribe that helped their women escape to Fort Jugfena first and were left behind at the Bandishia Plateau. Their men are letting the remaining women and children use their horses, and their warriors are running alongside our 3rd Cavalry Platoon.”

“I understand.”

While we were talking, the horses with children on them started passing by me as well, and with bustling noises and metallic clanging, women soon followed. Behind them were armed knights, probably to protect them as a rearguard.

“Our current situation here is that I’m afraid we may have fallen for Densel’s trap. The Densel army seems to have gone around ours and taken the southern route. Since I just heard battle cries from the center formation, it could be that they’re already engaged in battle.”

“Then, let us retreat back to the fortress by way of the Bandishia Plateau. Please leave leading the way up to me.”

Since that’s what I wanted to do as well, I nodded immediately in agreement with him. That’s when a man from the Shiru tribe who was on horseback came riding up in front of us. Although he had a bow in his hands, I noticed that his quiver was empty.

“Oi, the last of us, those with no weapons, have all arrived now! What are we supposed to do now!?”

He spoke fluent Artolan language. The only people who understood him were me and the knight though, Gunther and Paulo just looked at each other blankly.

“We’re going back to our fort by way of the Bandishia Plateau! Since fighting has already broken out on the plains, we’re going to avoid that path!”

As the knight answered, I saw an arrow flying in our direction from far behind us. I could hear vivid sounds of roaring and screaming. The pursuing Densel soldiers are close by. After the Shiru nomad who had used up all his arrows, injured stragglers kept trickling by us one by one. They smelled of blood and dirt.

“Let’s go. It’s time to head for Fort Jugfena.”

“I understand. Viscountess Kaldia, please lead your army.”

I’m strongly worried about leaving the rearguard duties up to the Franks squad, but we can’t afford to stay here a moment longer. I mimicked Paulo and smoothly jumped up onto my horse, and took its reins.

“Kaldia army, prepare to withdraw! Withdraw!”

Many soldiers passed by my side, with their swords and spears at the ready. Among them were also some male Shiru tribe warriors on foot, having ceded their horses to their women and children.

“We’re going to return to Fort Jugfena by way of the Bandishia Plateau! Begin marching!!”

As my troops were withdrawing, the Franks squad was advancing. With metallic clanging sounds in the air, combined with horses neighing and people screaming, I could hear clashing sounds as we withdrew from our current location.

Chapter 48: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 6)

The exhausted Shiru tribe were about 100 in number, and every one of them was trying their hardest to go as fast as they could despite their condition. Those that couldn't run anymore would change places with those on horses, everyone was lending each other hands and shoulders for support, and with the 3rd Cavalry Platoon leading the way, we hurried back towards Fort Jugfena.

Since we were mostly going uphill, people were reaching their limits. But even so, we couldn't afford to slow down, because we could hear the sounds of battle from right behind us, scaring people onwards.

Turning around to look, I could see the forces from Fort Jugfena fighting with the Densel army. Since they were battling at a lower elevation from us, I could see the whole situation quite clearly. The Densel army had indeed attacked from an unexpected direction, so the two armies' positions were reversed. The Densel army was in between Fort Jugfena and our forces, coming under attack from archer fire, while our forces were between the Densel army and their camp where the tents had been set on fire. With both armies trapped between a rock and a hard place, having nowhere to run, it seems that it's quite likely that it'll develop into a scene of brutal carnage.

I couldn't help but squint to get a closer look at the battlefield. Even though it was still fairly far away and it would be almost impossible to find someone specific, I couldn't help but look among the chaos for a speck of black.

"We're almost there, everyone please keep doing your best."

Suddenly, one of the knights who had remained silent up until now suddenly gave some encouragement to the Shiru tribe. Although he was speaking the Arxian language instead of Artolan language, somehow his meaning seems to have been transmitted to them, and the Shiru tribe appeared to be relieved. It's probably because the enemies haven't been

able to chase us up to here, and nobody has been saying anything until now, which gave them the sense of relief.

“It’s just a little more until we reach the fort. Let’s get there, then everyone can rest.”

I called out as well to a child who was shakily just holding on, and patted him on the shoulder to give him encouragement. He was riding on one of the Shiru tribe’s horses and appeared even younger than me. Although I was born as a noble, I’m unfortunately already used to the pace of a marching army.

Because we kept heading northeast, it was getting colder and colder. It’s because we’re getting closer to the Amon Nor Mountains. It’s a bit dark around here because the mountains are covered year round in snow clouds, giving it an eerie atmosphere. Even so, somehow the Shiru tribe quickened their pace.

We finally reached a cave on the mountainside. Without any hesitation, the knights headed straight inside. The Shiru tribe, and the Kaldia army as well, followed them.

It was dark inside the cave, and the air was stifling due to it being summer. It was still rather chilly though, and completely silent inside. Since several knights were vaguely lighting the way, we were able to at least see the direction to travel in. The lights the knights were using were probably light emitting stones created from the scales of the fire moths. They’re actually quite few and rare in number, and their effectiveness is about the same as the fire moths themselves. After traveling through the cave for a while, the knights paused in front of a stone door.

“Viscountess Kaldia, we’ve arrived at Fort Jugfena.”

A happy expression appeared on the knight that was walking in front of me. His relief was obvious to see.

“Wait a second, there’s no guards on the other side?”

The knight’s relieved expression disappeared instantly when another knight raised his voice.

“That’s probably because we’re currently in a wartime situation. Everyone is on lookout instead, also to prevent deserters as well. After all, it’s pretty easy to slip right across the border.”

“I see, so there was that as well?”

I was listening closely to the knights’ conversation, but I wasn’t quite convinced how that would be a good reason to leave this door unguarded. Since this hidden passage leads directly inside the fort, it seems too important to not leave a single guard here at all.

With an ominous feeling hanging over me, I spoke to the two knights that were having their conversation.

“An incident may have occurred here as well. I think it’ll be good if we wait to ascertain the situation before having the Shiru tribe enter the fort.”

The knights looked at each other, then they nodded at me.

“Alright, let’s have the Shiru tribe rest for a little while here. Half of the 3rd Cavalry Platoon and half of the Kaldia army shall remain here to guard them, just in case. The rest shall check out the situation inside the fort.”

“Understood.”

I nodded in agreement with their plan, and one of the two knights came up close to me. He began speaking to me in a really hushed tone of voice.

“.....Viscountess Kaldia, if it’s alright with you, would you join us for going inside the fort? There’s no guarantee that Densel soldiers won’t discover this cave and chase us down. If that happens, with the Shiru tribe here, things may get quite chaotic. We have the responsibility of defending you from enemy soldiers, but that may be quite difficult if there’s a chaotic situation.”

The knight had a serious expression on his face, and I looked up at him straight in the face in return. He looked so strict, that I couldn’t help but take a step back.

I nodded in agreement, and without changing his strict expression, the knight began the task of dividing people into who would go and who would remain here.

I let go of my breath, and loosened my stiff body. I had Gunther divide our army into two, and told him that we would be heading into the fort first to check the situation out, while the Shiru tribe got some rest.

“Alright, everything is ready, so let’s go.”

One of the knights raised his voice, and everyone who was selected to enter the fort lined up in front of the door. It took several people to open the heavy stone door, and it budged with creaking sounds, along with causing a warm wind to blow this way.

It was already dark before, and even after the stone door was opened it remained dark. While being surrounded by Gunther who was in charge of my personal protection and three other knights, I entered the fort, and we arrived at a large hall in the northernmost section of the fort. We came out of what had been disguised as an altar, covered with a gigantic tapestry embroidered with the Arxian national emblem.

“.....It’s too quiet.”

Other than the sounds of our breathing, there was no other sound at all. I could clearly hear someone in my party gulping and swallowing their saliva, then it became completely silent again.

“Let’s..... let’s go upstairs. The archer squad should be there.”

The knight leading us said so, and we began heading upstairs towards the nobles’ building from the northern hall.

Chapter 49: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 7)

The nobles' building in Fort Jugfena is farther north than the knight building I was currently staying at, it's where Earl Einsbark and his family usually live, and there's extra rooms for the occasional visiting noble as well. When the earl and his sons had treated me to a feast to welcome me here, the dining hall had been in this building as well.

On the first floor and the basement level of the nobles' building, there's also housing and rooms for the servants to use and work in. I had a room prepared for me in the knight building instead because my current bodyguard was Gunther who was a commoner, but for things like having my clothes washed, the servants would do that here.

Currently, everyone from the nobles' building should be in the basement. It seems that the basement's supposed to be the shelter in times of war.

Going through the completely empty nobles' building, we arrived at the tower connecting it with the knight building. It's a tower with a spiral staircase where no more than two people could possibly squeeze through at a time. It took a while for all of us to climb up, due to the lack of space. Maybe it's because everyone is worried, our pace was quite fast, almost like trotting. Well, for the adults it was like trotting, but for me I basically almost had to sprint.

The knight in front didn't even seem to consider the possibility that this place may have been attacked, and he knocked on a door at the top of the tower. Behind this door should have been Earl Einsbark, his son the military strategist Wiegraf, and the bow troops equipped with greatbows.

“.....Oi, why's there no response!?”

The soldiers were beginning to hit the door, getting very worried. Just as we opened the door, we heard someone shouting “Einsbark-sama!!” in despair.

The knights hurriedly began moving out. Being caught in the flow, I was forced to go along with them.

Sunlight was reflecting down on red liquid spreading out from the bodies of men clad in metal armor that were all slumped down on the cold stone floor. The floor was drenched completely red, and the entire place had an unbearable stench caused by all the blood, despite this being the outside of the tower, on the tower's roof.

It all felt like it almost wasn't real.

I could hear faint sounds of groaning coming from here and there. There must be a few people barely clinging on to life.

When my Kaldia army followed the knights here and arrived, it seems that none of them managed to throw up at this scene. Everyone seemed tense, with their eyes burning at the terrible tragic scene in front of them.

There were about forty archers that had fallen down in their pools of blood here, and the knights in charge of Earl Einsbark's personal protection had fallen here as well. There were another thirty or so dead people that appeared to be enemy soldiers here, a trivial amount compared to their overall numbers.

My intuition tells me that they're Densel soldiers, because they aren't wearing the tunics common to this region. However, I couldn't see Earl Einsbark who should be dressed in black knightly attire, or his son Wiegraf anywhere.

"Einsbark-sama, he's not here! Einsbark-sama, Wiegraf-sama, where are you!!"

The members of the knights began desperately searching this area. Earl Einsbark also serves as the leader of all the knights. Of course the knights would look up to and respect him. Wiegraf is the strategist. He would come up with the battle strategy, and the knights would carry it out, their very lives depend on him. I feel like the knights must have a very strong sense of trust in them to be able to rely on each other so much.

While looking at this situation, the question of whether or not my own

army would also desperately search for me like this popped into my mind. I don't think I've done anything deserving of respect, nor do I think I've established a foundation of trust with them.

My relationship with my soldiers is, I'm the daughter of someone they all hate, and I have to be on guard for them rebelling and killing me at any moment, since I don't think it would be strange at all for any of them to want to do that.

However – I think that dying by betrayal would be for the best. Even if I died, nobody would get worked up about me.

When I slowly blinked and looked back up at my surroundings, I saw an old archer leaning against the wall. The man laying on top of him had black hair with streaks of blue in it spilling out of his helmet.

And just like these two laying on top of each other, so many soldiers have lost their lives. But somehow, the more I looked at these two, the more I felt like they were positioned as if to protect them from something.

I wondered if it could possibly be, and I checked to make sure, they turned out to be Earl Einsbark and his son Wiegraf. They were both unconscious, but still breathing. I told the knights escorting me what I had noticed, and as they confirmed it for themselves, they sighed in relief.

“It, it's Earl Einsbark and his son Wiegraf-sama! They're still living!”

“What, really!? Where!!”

“Right here! He's disguised as an archer!!”

The knights were making a big fuss as they gathered around us. My army and I allowed them to have this place to themselves, and took a step back.

I turned to look at the wide Great Plains that could be seen from the fort. Just yesterday it had still been a lush green, filled with flowers, and after being trampled by people and horses today, there was hardly anything left worth seeing. Beyond that, I could see clouds of dust being raised in the distance. I could hear faint sounds of battle all the way from

here, I wonder if it's because of the wind's direction. Or, I wonder if it's because everything is too quiet at Fort Jugfena. The archers should have been packed on top of the tower's roof as well, but not a single one of them was standing. They've probably all been defeated.

"Charlie, can I have a moment of your time?"

One of my soldiers called out to me. He was on the opposite side of the tower from me, looking at the direction of Arxia.

"What's that....."

The soldier was pointing straight below him. What should have been there was the refugees' tents.

However, what was there instead was an incredible amount of dead bodies stacked on top of each other. The very earth itself seemed to be stained red.

"How could this happen....."

I couldn't help but speak that out loud. I could feel myself almost choking.

The refugees were people without any weapons or riches. Even so, the Densel soldiers killed all of them.

This is just a massacre. Rather than hoping to gain something from this war, I'm wondering if they came here just in search of people to slaughter.

I could feel my hand shaking against the cold stone wall.

Why did they kill them all. Was it all just for pleasure? I bit my lip as I tried to bear the brunt of what I was feeling.

A memory of red eyes flashed across my mind. I saw the cold yet beautiful face of my father with that ecstatic smile of his.

Chapter 50: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 8)

I don't have the time right now to be distracted by my vivid memories of father and his crazy smile.

We were suddenly attacked.

On the other side of the tower we were on that connected the nobles' building and the knight building, the door to the tower that connected the knight building to the barracks was suddenly kicked open. With metallic clanging sounds, enemy soldiers drew their swords and came swarming like an avalanche, charging at the soldiers from my army closest to them.

"Dominic! Igor!"

Instantly, one of my soldiers had a fresh blood splatter down his back, while another one of my soldiers had a sword piercing through his stomach. My whole body felt like it was simultaneously flying into a hot-blooded rage, as well as trembling as if I was cold, bound by a strange feeling.

Before I realized it I was shouting out their names. The voice coming from my throat sounded more heartbreaking than I've ever heard it before.

"Richard, Wojciech!"

My soldiers were attacking the ambushers that had cut down Dominic and Igor. However, they were surrounded by a greater number of enemies, and Richard and Wojciech were pierced through by swords as well. With their eyes still wide open, both of them collapsed on the stone roof. I saw them convulsing limply with blood running out of their bodies, until someone's arm blocked my vision.

"My lord, please get down!"

The arm was Gunther's. Under his protection, we retreated back towards the nobles' building, and I put a hand on the hilt of my sword.

Since overly long weapons would be useless indoors, I had left my halberd that Ergnade had taught me how to handle back in the mountain cave with the Shiru tribe.

Like the wind, the knights appeared from behind me to jump to my defense. They began cutting off enemy heads with their swords, and piercing them through their chests in return.

However, our assailants kept up their fierce attack. The assailants were equipped with slightly shorter swords than the average ones in Arxia, with extremely sharpened tips. It's basically a single-edged weapon, strong at piercing, and easy to wield due to how light it is.

It's become a chaotic melee on the fort's rooftop, with screams, death cries, and angry roars adding to the confusion. People on both sides were dying left and right, even falling off the fort's roof to the ground far down below.

At this ghastly scene, father's howling laugh from long ago echoed in the back of my head. I felt like I was seeing the hell that father had created all over again.

My knees were quivering, and my brain seemed completely numb.

"My lord, please escape!"

The moment that Gunther called out to me, an attacker came from my blind spot behind a pillar, flying at me. As I was jumping backwards, Gunther's sword was already blocking the attacker's sword. With the clashing sound of metal against metal, Gunther blew away his opponent completely. However, at the next moment another enemy was already attacking Gunther with a short spear.

"Gunther!"

I gulped. My body felt leaden. All I could hear was my father's howling laughter in the back of my head. With the metal equipment that Gunther received from Fort Jugfena, he successfully deflected the enemy's attack, then cut off the enemy's head with his sword.

"Get out of here already!"

He roared angrily at me with worry in his voice. His voice sprang my body into action, and I finally took a step.

The other knights charged with my protection were also fending off attackers coming from all directions. If even one of them falls it feels like we'll be overwhelmed, alarm bells were now ringing in my head. Turning around, I saw some knights retreating back into the nobles' building with the fainted Earl Einsbark and Wiegaf. One of them noticed my situation, and came running back over here with sword in hand.

"Hurry up and get out of here!"

At the same time that he was shouting at me, I was running there in a straight line as fast as I could.

From the side, I saw a type of gauntlet glove I've never seen before reach out, and slice the knight running over to me in half. Together with the knight's dying scream, blood splashed out on me in a long stream. My right ear was beating in pain from the loudness of his scream. Luckily at least blood didn't splash into my eyes. I used the inside of my sleeve to roughly wipe off the blood on my forehead.

I can't stop just because I got splashed with some warm liquid. I slowed my running slightly so that I could change direction at any time. For the first time ever, I cursed at how young and weak my body was still, feeling just how much of a difference there was in physical capabilities between me and the knights.

"Viscountess!!"

Someone was screaming for me. I jumped sideways because I saw a reflection of light in the edge of my field of vision.

Sure enough, I made a good decision. I heard the sound of cloth tearing, and felt myself being pulled slightly by the momentum of something passing by me. It seems that my cloak has been torn. My helmet fell off, making a banging sound against the floor. I still had my hand on the hilt of my sword.

I jumped up again without even taking a moment to catch my breath.

Something heavy bounced off against the ground where my face had been just one second earlier. I didn't even dare to look back behind me, and kept running again.

However, at that moment I started choking. Someone was dragging me by my torn cloak. He lifted me up into the air by my cloak, choking me.

“Cough.....”

I reflexively grabbed at the cloth around my neck with both hands feverishly. Even so, all I could do was swing helplessly in the air. Although I kept trying to scratch and kick the person holding on to me, it did nothing at all.

I was getting dizzy and my eyes couldn't see anything. Together with my vision flickering, my whole body was shaking violently. I was beginning to foam from my mouth, and it was dripping down my cheeks.

“Having a brat on the battlefield, eh. It's the same everywhere.”

As everything in my world was going blurry, the only thing I could still hear clearly was the coarse sounding voice of the man holding me.

“How pitiful. That's right, at the very least, I'll let you have some fun before dying. All children love to dream about flying, don't they?”

As he said so, the man began laughing rather unpleasantly. Although I kept struggling –

I suddenly felt the pressure and pain against my neck disappear.

“Ah,”

My clothes were making annoying flapping sounds. My arms kept reflexively trying to grab onto something. All I got was handfuls of air.

After I was thrown off the top of the fort, although it was ridiculous, I couldn't help but think of the free fall amusement park ride I rode before in my previous life.

At the same time, goosebumps were crawling up my flesh. I was rapidly approaching the ground, but my fear of death was completely dispersed due to the sound of my father's howling laughter repeatedly echoing in

my head.

Chapter 51: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 9)

My voice wouldn't come out. In the end, that might have been lucky for me because I kept my mouth closed.

Someone grabbed me by my belly, and it felt like my internal organs would spill out. My vision was greatly shaking. There was very little pain.

The first thing I saw was the ground sliding by me. Then I noticed the shadow reflected on the ground. It was the shape of a draconis, gliding on the wind.

“You alright!?”

Right next to me, I heard a very familiar voice. In a different way from before, I caught my breath again. Even though he shouldn't have been here – to be more accurate, I had him sent away – how did he appear here at this moment in time? The inner corners of my eyes were getting warm, and I arbitrarily felt relief at hearing his voice.

However, anxiety was also doing battle with that sense of relief. My face stiffened, and what came out of my mouth sounded ice cold.

“.....You disobeyed your orders. You left your post without permission.”

Even though that wasn't what I wanted to say at all. However, the words I wanted to say got caught in the back of my throat, and wouldn't come out at all.

“Honestly, Charlie doesn't act cute at all.”

With a gentle wry smile, he pulled me up onto Rashio's back. Seeing his attitude as well caused my chest to tighten in pain.

– Kamil. Why are you here.

“Are you alright, Erbetia-dono!!”

From above me, I heard yet another familiar voice, coming from a red-winged draconis swirling and flapping about in the air. Its wings had a

different colored hue from the reddish purple of Rashiok's wings, but it was beautiful as well, sparkling in the sun. This is probably one of Rashiok's siblings.

“Claudia-dono?”

On top of the draconis, I could see the stunning sight of Claudia and her beautiful blonde hair being buffeted by the wind. Maybe it's because we haven't seen each other for a while, she got my name ridiculously wrong. Who's Erbetia supposed to be, really.

Why are the two of them here, I wonder. As I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion, I noticed one more person behind Claudia.

“.....Who's that?”

The face seems familiar, is what I thought. It belonged to a young man in his teenage years that was steadily maturing. His beautiful, dauntless features appeared slightly strict, and his cloak fluttering in the wind was unmistakably that of Fort Jugfena's knights.

His strict expression reminded me of Earl Terejia somehow. Maybe that's why I'm getting a sense of déjà vu.

“We can talk later!”

That's the only thing he said, and the red-winged draconis flapped its wings and rose in the sky. Maybe they've already decided on some strategy, Kamil and Rashiok rose up as well. Being right next to them, I could hear the fluttering sounds of Rashiok's wings.

The two draconis soared lightly back up to Fort Jugfena's roof. Both sides that were busy killing each other looked up to see what was going on.

I wonder just what kind of balance sense she has, Claudia was somehow standing up on the red-winged draconis with her favorite spear in one hand, and bow and arrow in her other hand without falling off.

She was smiling in satisfaction, her joy at the situation was so pure that it was chilling. Still, it didn't remind me of father's dreadful smile, maybe

it's because the emotion they're putting into it are different.

Then, without hesitation – Claudia jumped off the draconis's back. With weapons in hand, she landed gracefully in the middle of the battle taking place.

With the loud sound that was caused by Claudia's landing, a moment of silence descended over Fort Jugfena. It was still from quite a height that she jumped off, I wonder how she managed to do it without injuring herself. No matter how I look at it, I feel like the impact should have been too much for her to take.

I wonder just how much this girl breaks the rules of common sense. Claudia seemed so out of place and surreal here, that she actually lowered the tension of the battlefield.

Claudia inhaled and took a deep breath, and announced herself grandly.

“MY NAME IS CLAUDIA ROLENTSOR. I'M DEEPLY INDEBTED TO VISCOUNTESS KALDIA, SO FOR THIS BATTLE, I'M HERE TO AID THE KNIGHTS OF FORT JUGFENA!”

My eardrums were throbbing at her excessive volume. For the soldiers and knights standing closest to her, both enemies and allies were covering their ears as well.

Rather than this being an otome game world, it felt more like a shonen manga right now.

“GUNTHER-DONO!”

Once again, Claudia was raising her voice incredibly loudly, and she tossed her bow and arrows to Gunther who was surrounded by frozen enemy soldiers distracted by her spectacle. Gunther who was the fastest to return to normal among them quickly dropped his sword and caught the bow and arrows.

.....A sword fell on an enemy soldier's foot.

“–Aghh!?”

When the enemies realized what was going on, Gunther was already

firing his first arrow. An enemy soldier was shot right between his eyes and dropped his sword on his foot.

“That person, although he’s one of the finest among the army in both swordsmanship and the spear, his best weapon is actually the bow.”

While I was still processing what was going on, staring blankly at the sight in front of me, I heard Kamil speaking softly next to me.

The enemy soldiers were being cut down in swathes by Claudia’s spear, making me wonder just how her slender arms could have that much power to wield her weapon like that. It was almost like her spear was dancing, and she even knocked out an enemy behind her with a blow to the solar plexus with the spear handle. She was taking full advantage of the weight of a metal spear and making it seem like it weighed nothing, blowing away all her enemies.

My cheek twitched as I saw for myself what an unstoppable force she was.

Suddenly, I felt Kamil holding on to my stomach with one hand. Rashiok was descending.

With a roar, Rashiok scattered all the enemy soldiers in the vicinity as we glided on top of the tower connecting the nobles’ building and the knight building.

“Get down!”

Although it was a bit sudden and right after he said it, Kamil jumped off of Rashiok while holding on to me. I felt quite the impact, and my breath was knocked out of me.

“Right now!”

We had landed right next to the knights that were barely holding on while protecting the unconscious Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf. Kamil brought me to them while still holding on to me.

“It, it’s Claudia and Rashiok and company!”

“It’s alright, although the enemy is an annoying one, with their level we

won't be losing."

Although the soldiers greeted us excitedly, Kamil responded back to them calmly. However, in my head I recalled the scene of Dominic and the other soldiers from my army dying.

Kamil just said that "we won't lose." He didn't say that "nobody would die."

However, this is a war after all, there's no helping it. In battle, soldiers have the realization that they may die at any time, and haven't I been leading them all this time while knowing that as well.

I swallowed my saliva to help me breathe again, and finally felt like I was clearing my mind.

Instead of wishing for everyone to live, I wished for victory. Only victory would give their sacrificed lives meaning.

Because I know that, that's why I've come here.

That's why, in order to connect myself to their feelings, I have to live as much as possible. At the very least, I won't allow myself to be killed for revenge just because I let my guard down.

I could feel an ice cold feeling reviving myself, and helping my body to recover its energy. I struggled free from Kamil's arm holding on to me.

"-Charlie?"

"I can run for myself."

When he reached his hand out to me in puzzlement, I casually dodged it. Even Kamil might try to kill me someday – if he ever finds out what I'm guilty of.

For example, even if he cuts me down right now, I'm sure it'll just be written off as me having been "killed in action." If Kamil really wanted to kill me and get away with it, this war will be a golden opportunity for him.

– Kamil. Why have you come here.

Once again, I asked myself that question in my mind, and I felt a piercing pain in my chest.

Chapter 52: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 10)

The knights carrying Earl Einsbark and Wiegraf went through the nobles' building and headed straight for the hidden passage leading to the cave. There's probably nowhere else that can serve as a place to shelter nobles.

Since it's clear now that the enemy has taken over Fort Jugfena, without even knowing their total numbers or the route they took, hiding in the hidden passage that the enemy probably doesn't know about for the time being is probably the best course of action.

Mixing along with the knights, Kamil and I escaped as well.

As we headed down a long corridor in the nobles' building, I saw a wide space that was gaudily decorated. It's the space that serves as an entrance hall to the nobles' building, connecting the second and third floors. Since the first floor is for the servants, that's why the entrance hall for welcoming guests to the nobles' building is on the second floor.

Because this is about the halfway point, after having escaped to here, I was finally able to loosen up slightly and slacken the tension in my shoulders. Although I didn't actually run for that long, due to the abnormal feeling of being on the battlefield, the time felt unpleasantly longer than usual.

After passing through this hall and the next one, that's where the big hall with the hidden passage should be.

However.

"-Wait! Stop!"

A knight running in front of us raised his voice to stop us. Everyone immediately got ready for battle. I also tightly gripped the hilt of my sword, and slightly pulled it out of its sheath.

The tension in the air was so thick it felt almost visible. I did my best to

sharpen my five senses as much as possible, to notice anything at all – and I heard a light sound.

“What’s there!?”

“Be quiet!!”

Someone had quite a sharp tone of voice. And with that, the knights fell silent, even hiding the sounds of their breathing as much as possible. The entrance hall of the nobles’ building instantly became completely silent.

.....Then, I heard a more horribly dreadful sound than I’ve ever heard before.

It was a rattling sound, caused by something unknown. It sort of sounded like the sound a wooden instrument would make when you hit it. The rattling sound was echoing throughout the hallway.

Something was in the next hallway. While being as vigilant as possible, some of the knights began advancing to determine the source of the sound.

I swallowed slightly as I heard some more sounds. Then, I suddenly heard screaming.

“-Run! It’s magical beasts! It’s baboons from the Monster Forest, Abijhanas!”

At that moment, vulgar sounding laughter echoed through the hallway. So that’s what it was. The laughter came from a magical beast that sounded quite similar to humans. Everyone began running back at full speed, forgetting to even breathe.

Magical beasts, why would monster baboons be here now at this timing. This is the worst.

A monster baboon is one of the most brutal, ferocious, and intelligent types of monsters living in the Monster Forest. But, usually monsters from the Monster Forest shouldn’t be coming out on their own.

We ran to the tower that connected the nobles’ building to the knight building. But the moment we reached the knight building, another knight

that was leading the way screamed again.

“It’s no good, the enemy’s here!!”

“To the tower! Go through the tower to the third floor!”

Once again we turned back, this time running back to the tower from before, climbing back up the tower that we had just run down a few minutes earlier. While the knights jostled each other as they climbed up the narrow spiral staircase, finally the last person came up and they put a bar over the door.

“Hurry!”

It’s obvious that a bar alone wouldn’t be much to stop the enemy. I could already hear the sound of a body hitting against the door, with a crushing sound resounding throughout the tower.

It was a frightening sound that spurred us onwards.

Just as I reached the third floor’s hallway, I could hear a dull thud behind me as the door was knocked over and crashed against the stone floor.

“Hurry up, to the main hall!”

I could hear some people chasing after us, but that was all I knew. I didn’t have the time to turn around and look.

Since the knights were still carrying the two injured nobles, it would be very difficult to stop and counterattack the enemy here. I mean, in the first place, I’m not much better than baggage, same as the two unconscious over there, so the knights probably won’t ask for my opinion.

Maybe the enemy doesn’t have bows, they weren’t shooting arrows at us, but other projectiles were flying towards us. It was getting to an extent where it was getting harder to run due to things cluttering the corridors.

I ran as fast as I could so that I’d be a difficult target, but something like a plate crashed into the wall next to me and cracked, leaving some slight pain on my cheek as one of its shards scratched me.

There’s nothing I can do at all about the fact that I’m still small and

slow, and I was falling farther and farther behind, into the back ranks.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm, and pulled me behind him. When I realized what was going on, it was Kamil who had changed places with me for some reason.

Uwaa, a sound of surprise came out of me. However, it was drowned out by a boom. Everything in my vision became pure white as something exploded in front of my eyes.

While carrying me, Kamil was running away from the explosion point as fast as he could. On the edges of my vision, I could see pillars of fire rising. I could only stare dumbfounded in blank amazement as the carpet and the curtains on the barred windows went up in flames instantly. Kamil covered me as much as he could, and I don't know whether to say it was more like he was carrying me or dragging me, he ran with me in the opposite direction from the one where we were heading just earlier.

I could just make out that the glass windows were cracking and shattering, with the pieces blowing outside. I could feel it getting hotter and hotter behind me. The woolen carpets are making it really easy for the fire to burn. My heart was beating so fast that I wondered if I would get a heart attack.

What was that? A bomb? No way.

I've never heard of such a weapon being invented here, and gunpowder's not at that level here. Maybe it's at the level of being able to create Molotov cocktails, but even those can't explode. What's more, until that explosion happened, I've never seen such a fire like that either.

My body felt like it was floating. Kamil was lifting me up with one hand. And, I took a deep breath at what I saw.

Kamil's right arm that was holding on to me was badly burned and it was dripping blood. It must be from the bomb earlier – did he protect me from the explosion?

Come to think of it, there's a dull, numb pain on my hands and feet and cheeks. When I looked down at myself, it wasn't as bad as Kamil, but I

was bleeding all over the place.

It's not to the point where my life would be in danger, and maybe it's because my blood is actively circulating around, even though I should be hotheaded right now, my head was miraculously and terribly ice cold clear.

As if fog was clearing, I remembered some previously blurry fragmented memories from my previous life.

.....That's right, guns appeared in the Arxia Kingdom where this otome game had taken place. Although it was a muzzle loader type, I remember there was a conversation about using them to suppress magical beasts.

Nothing's happened in this world like the scenarios in the game, but if guns aren't supposed to be considered rare in seven to eight years, then of course there should be gunpowder in this world. Even if Arxia doesn't have such technology right now, maybe Densel does, or maybe it was obtained by the country of Parmigran as they trade on the seas with many other countries.

Chapter 53: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 11)

Anyways, to think that monster baboons would suddenly appear in Fort Jugfena. When we passed by the third floor the first time, those monsters hadn't been there in the entrance hall.

The timing, and the fact that they're in the fort, everything is going too good for Densel.

Suddenly, something occurred to me.

When I first came to Fort Jugfena, I had seen a bloodstained red seeping out from the misty Monster Forest while it was hazy and drizzling. It couldn't be. There shouldn't be anyone that would go to the Monster Forest. Perhaps, it was Densel soldiers that were making preparations already so that they could invade us through the Monster Forest. On top of that, they must have had the ability to transport monster baboons here to Fort Jugfena.

It doesn't seem real. But, I can't think of any other explanation. I can't think of any other reason why there would be monster baboons here in Fort Jugfena.

"Get out of my way!!"

While still holding on to me with one arm, Kamil dove straight into our pursuers behind us. It felt like my heart was freezing over.

I was wondering if Kamil wanted to kill me so much that he would be willing to die as well, fear, anger, and suspicion were all welling up within me. But it's too late to escape from his arm now. The fire's right behind me.

Kamil dodged the slashes from the attackers closest to us, and just like long ago when he cut down the earth lizard, he killed someone with a single stab. The point of Kamil's sword went in between the enemy's clavicle and the soft fleshy part of his neck.

As expected, that winter day Kamil had been trying to hide his true skills from me. My face was turning slightly pale.

Kamil dodged the next attacker's sword swing easily, and he even slit the throat of the man hiding behind him waiting to ambush us. He did all of this with a backhanded grip on his sword, and without even looking. Smack, I heard another soft sound and the splashing of some warm liquid.

In an instant, Kamil killed three people like it was nothing. I could only watch what was going on in a daze.

At the same time, I was so scared that goosebumps were crawling up my flesh. He has the skill to kill people so easily – no, why does Kamil have the training to be able to specialize in killing people so easily.

While repeating his movements robotically, Kamil kept dodging all enemies' attacks and slicing their throats, and in less than five minutes, Kamil had taken out all twentyish pursuers by himself. There was so much blood that it was seeping into the carpet, and blood was splashing everywhere and making ripples as it dripped off of Kamil's hair. A smell of iron mixed in with the smell of death, and my stomach started overturning and I began to hurl. Because I only had a light breakfast, at least there wasn't much to throw up.

After I finished throwing up, Kamil's blood-covered left hand touched my back.

"You alright?"

As he asked me, he started running with me again. There's monster baboons on the second floor, and the third floor is covered in fire, there's no path to the hidden passage.

It seems that he's not going to kill me in those pools of blood, I wonder if it's because he doesn't have the time to as the fire is still coming after us, – or maybe he just wants to get to the bottom of my identity first before killing me.

On the other side of the flames, are the knights carrying Earl Einsbark

and Wiegraf still okay? There was only one knight left behind on this side of the fire, but due to being seriously injured by shrapnel from the explosion, he had died in the fire.

“.....Where are we going?”

Why is it that, it feels so painful to just open my mouth. My hands and feet feel so hot. I feel like they're burning in the fire. Kamil looked down at me and my expression that looked like it was about to cry. Whatever his facial expression meant, I'm too tired to even think about it right now.

“Somewhere..... Anywhere, that's safe.....”

Just as Kamil replied to me in a soft voice, in the distance I heard the booming sound of another explosion. It came from above us. It must be another explosive. Then, another explosion followed shortly after it. It seems that going up will be a bad idea.

“.....Let, me down. I can, run on my own.....”

I was muttering. Kamil either didn't or pretended not to hear me, and he adjusted me in his grip as if to make me more comfortable, and increased his speed even more.

We passed the tower, and went through the knight building all the way to the barracks. Since the enemies had kept coming from the south, I thought that we would get annihilated by enemy soldiers there, but contrary to my expectations there were few enemies, and Kamil disposed of all the enemy soldiers that weren't wearing our tunics without a sound.

The nobles' building had stopped burning. After the carpet and curtains were burned up, there's nothing else other than rough, sturdy stone corridors.

Why had Kamil killed so many and brought me here, I wonder. As I thought, is he trying to kill me? But then why isn't he killing me yet.

I'm so tired, that I could only keep thinking about this in circles, but because my analyzation level had gone down so much I couldn't even get an answer.

As I heard some mayhem outside the window, that's when it happened.

Chapter 54: Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena (Part 12)

Even though he didn't put me down, at least Kamil brought me closer to the window.

Outside the window, the castle door had been broken down, and waves of people were flooding in. When I saw soldiers wearing the insignia of the Densel army, I felt chilled to the bone.

– However, driving them like sheep, seeming like they were chasing and routing the enemy, were knights from the 1st Cavalry Platoon wearing our black tunics.

The 1st Cavalry Platoon was in high spirits as they trapped the remnants of the enemy army against the fort's walls. I witnessed Ergnade calmly strolling through the castle door, still dressed in black while surrounded by knights.

I'm glad he's okay.

He's in the back of the center formation of the army, and he's responsible for coordinating the left wing, the right wing, and the mobile divisions to stop the Densel attack against us.

Of course, his risk of dying in battle is quite high.

Although he's safe, there's still risk as there's nobody that could take his place.

He taught me the halberd, he served as my escort at the fort, and just like my previous life's parents – it felt like he was taking such good care of me just like them, even though I'm just someone he didn't know until he was ordered to be with me, even though I had locked away knowledge of how a family should feel like away in a corner in my mind ever since I killed mine, thinking there's no helping it.

Anyways, it seems that the battle on the Great Plains has been decided and things are turning back in our favor. I couldn't help but let go of my

breath and sigh. I'm pretty sure that it's because I'm relieved.

I finally allowed myself to relax and calm down a little.

"-Please..... help..... me....."

I suddenly heard a faint voice, maybe it's because I was able to calm myself down and focus more on my surroundings.

It was a faint voice that I could barely hear on the wind. The first time I heard it, I even wondered if I was hearing things.

"Pl, -se..... he-..... me....."

"Kamil, do you hear something?"

"Hm? Ah, you're right."

It's the weak voice of someone crying out for help. As for whether it's coming from an enemy or an ally, I don't know.

I don't know where the voice is coming from, but considering the way this fort is built it can't be far from us. It must be coming from a location close by.

As I thought about the voice, either it's due to my relief, or that my brain has gotten some rest and is no longer in such a tense state, it was much easier for me to think things through.

"Let's go take a look. If it's someone we should help then we can help. If it's an enemy we can just leave them be."

"Charlie, that's....."

Kamil hesitantly disagreed with me. However, my fear and distrust of Kamil was still strong in my mind.

He hid his skill with the sword from me, and definitely deceived me about it. He also rushed here to Fort Jugfena for some reason without any orders of the sort.

However, all these suspicions are also making me weary and heavy on my heart.

I can't trust him. But, I don't want to doubt him anymore.

If I'm alone with him, I get even more stressed out. Since today has been completely out of the ordinary with a battle going on, and precisely because I saw for myself just how skilled Kamil is, I really don't want to be alone with him. I really want to get to somewhere with someone else around, so wanting to escape, I deceived him as well.

Meaning, I simply can't just trust Kamil right now. Even if he protected me from the bomb's explosion with his right arm and got himself burned and full of holes. Whenever I'm alone with him, I can't shake the feeling from my mind that he might point his sword at me at any moment.

".....Got it."

It seems that Kamil felt there was no helping it, so he finally left the window side. Then, he opened the door to the closest room.

Nothing but silence greeted us in this room, there was only a simple desk and a bed inside. It doesn't even seem like this place was disturbed, it seems that wherever that voice came from, it wasn't from here.

"Maybe it's from the next room?"

Kamil casually opened the door to the next room.

There was nothing in the next room as well, and only dead corpses that wouldn't move were in the room after that, we checked to make sure that none of them were still living. It took us a few minutes to check through all the dead people, then we headed on to the next rooms.

Some of the rooms were locked. Just in case the enemy had stolen some keys and locked the rooms or some such, Kamil opened each of the doors with some sort of thin metal cylinder as a lockpick. At seeing yet another dangerous skill, I was quite shaken.

As we kept searching through the rooms, I could no longer hear the voice calling for help.

"It didn't sound that far away from us....."

"Maybe they're unconscious, or they even could have died by now."

"Even if that's so, and there's no helping it, Charlie won't be satisfied

until we look everywhere, right?"

Kamil's arm was shaking slightly as he kept holding on to me.

I actually don't care all that much if we find the owner of that voice or not. However, I can't say that out loud right now. It seems that my lies are piling up more and more.....

Since I remained silent without agreeing or disagreeing, Kamil also didn't say anything.

This is the last room. This is the room in the farthest corner of the barracks, and Kamil and I both listened closely for sounds.

I can't hear anything. Whether it's calls for help, panting, moaning, or even scratching sounds.

Kamil twisted the doorknob. He pushed the door open. I saw clearly into the room.

- There were signs that a battle had taken place in this room, but there was nobody in sight at all.

"No one's-"

here, is what I was just about to say when it happened.

I could feel the unmistakable taste of blood in my mouth spreading, and something shook my entire body. There was something stuck in my mouth that I had bitten on.

At the same time, there was a terribly harsh sound of an impact. Boom, and then I heard the sound of flesh ripping apart.

Kamil's body was slightly shaking. Urgh, I heard him moaning under his breath.

Chapter 55: Conclusion Of The Defensive Battle At Fort Jugfena

Since Kamil's shoulder was covering me, I had no idea what was going on.

I heard the door slam shut violently with a loud bang – then, from the other side of the door, I could hear some sort of raucous roaring laughter coming from a monster baboon.

Kamil jumped to the next room over with me. He hastily tossed me on top of the bed, and I landed face first on the downy blanket. I immediately raised myself up on my arms, and saw Kamil piling up some furniture in front of the door. The dressing table, chair, a clothes box, a chest – without saying anything, he was quickly stacking them up.

I also seem to have bit Kamil's finger just earlier when whatever it was happened. I wonder if he had let me do it on purpose so that I didn't bite my tongue.

Kamil was bleeding from his sides as he moved the furniture around. However, just as I was about to get up and move, when I took another look at Kamil, my body couldn't help but stiffen.

Just then, there was a tapping sound on the door. It started off soft at first, but kept getting louder and louder.

I could hear an unpleasant rattling sound together with that eerie laughter from the other side of the door. Something was hitting the door now. It's continuing to get even louder.

Is it playing around, this monster baboon that's causing these sounds. It disgustingly feels like as if it's having fun toying with its prey that it's chased and cornered.

Soon, Kamil seemed to run out of energy and sat down with his back against the pile of furniture.

I got up, and stared at Kamil again. He seemed to be shaking all over his

body, and it seemed like his strength was leaving him.

“K, Kamil.....”

A pathetic, trembling voice came out of me. What am I trying to say to him at this point in time, me.

That monster baboon must have been mimicking the sound of someone crying out for help, no matter how I think about it this situation is my fault that we've fallen for its trap.

Blood kept flowing out of Kamil's sides endlessly, seeping into the stone floor. He seems to have injured his internal organs, as dark blood was dripping out of the corner of Kamil's mouth.

I didn't move even one finger. My brain was numb, and I couldn't do anything other than stare at Kamil.

Even though we were alone together, even in rooms filled with corpses, Kamil didn't kill me. It's my distrust towards him that's led to this current situation.

With those sorts of injuries, all he can do is wait for death. There's such a large hole in his side, and his internal organs are injured as well with no way to give him medical treatment.

The back of my throat was aching with something hot. My sight turned blurry, as lukewarm water started splashing down my cheeks from my eyes.

Kamil merely smiled gently at me. It felt like my heart was being squeezed to pieces.

“.....It's fine. It can't be helped, this is my job.”

Kamil opened his mouth and spoke to me in a weak voice. He kept coughing up horrific amounts of blood, and his body was trembling violently now. He's shaking so badly, I'm pretty sure he's realized his own situation as well.

“You couldn't, trust in me, right? As for the things I hid from you, to the best of my abilities, it was something that couldn't be helped.”

As Kamil continued speaking in a piecemeal manner, the hitting sounds against the door were continuing to grow in volume. I don't think I've ever been so annoyed in my life before. I want to listen to Kamil talking without having to listen over those sounds.

"You probably knew that I'm the son of, the merchant, that, killed, your family."

I couldn't even nod, all I could do was listen to his words, forgetting to even breathe.

"I'm sorry..... that my father, killed, your entire family. That's why, to make up for it, I wanted to at the very least, protect you. I mean, you're really just a small child."

In the middle, Kamil's voice suddenly got even choppy, and he had gotten so passionate that it was moving me to tears.

Do I want to cry and scream at the top of my lungs, or should I be begging Kamil for forgiveness right now, my feelings and regrets were swirling about inside me like a vortex right now.

However, that as well, ended quickly and it felt like I was deflating like a balloon. The feelings that were bloating me just earlier were nowhere to be found.

Everything is something that I've caused myself. Since everything is my fault, I think it'll be for the best if I just honestly tell Kamil that I was the root of everything.

"-No, that's not it, Kamil....."

Before I realized it, I was slowly shaking my head. Since I wasn't able to accept before that Kamil had no ill will towards me and wasn't plotting against me – of course he'd never forgive me. I know that I'm only telling him to selfishly lessen the burden on myself.

My bad habit of clenching my fists as tightly as I could showed itself again, and my nails were digging deep ridges into my palms.

".....Char, lie?"

Kamil's voice was confused, and he seemed to stop himself from trembling as much as he could, to make eye contact with me.

"I myself was the one who killed my family. Kamil, your father was falsely accused of it and executed for a crime he didn't commit. I'm really sorry about what happened."

Kamil was looking at me wide-eyed in amazement, looking at me so directly that I really felt like averting my eyes. My body was completely tense. I couldn't breathe.

What will he say.

Well now that I've said it, I'm regretting it.

Why did I tell Kamil something about my treacherous self when he's on the verge of death, I wonder. I must only be searching for my own self-satisfaction, pouring out my guilt to him.

I felt like gouging at myself as I wallowed in self-loathing.

Kamil quietly closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"-.....Oh, so that's what happened."

Really, his voice remained so calm.

- Then, Kamil didn't open his eyes. While trembling, I took a step. I got down from the bed, and crawled to Kamil's side.

"Kamil.....?"

I hesitantly touched his blood-caked face with my hand, finding that his blood was already drying. His face was frightfully cold, and I shuddered involuntarily.

".....I can't, move anymore..... It can't be, helped..... Charlie's....."

As if he found things really annoying, Kamil sighed deeply.

He sluggishly lifted his hand, and hugged my head against his right shoulder. Although I was thrown a bit off balance by his body weight, and had to use a hand to support myself, I obediently let him hug me.

Close by to me, it felt like the monster baboon was about to break down

the door at any moment, the crashing sounds against the door had gotten so loud.

However, for some reason I didn't feel scared at all.

More than that, I was more scared of how fast I could feel Kamil's body warmth leaving him even touching him through his clothes.

I slid my head down from his shoulder slightly, to his left breast.

When I heard that his heart was still beating feebly, I felt so relieved that I started crying.

He's still alive.

Without even worrying about the crashing sounds against the door, I just listened to his heartbeat get weaker and weaker.

– Then, I couldn't hear it anymore, and his hand against my head fell limp to the ground.

Outside the door, I heard a terrible screaming sound coming from the monster baboon. The sound of people shouting echoed throughout the hallways. I think I heard Ergnade's voice among them.

Chapter 56: The Bitter Result Of My Crime

“.....Densel has issued a statement saying that they have nothing to do with the incident that occurred at Fort Jugfena. It seems that they're treating it as an isolated incident caused by exiled soldiers.”

Earl Terejia told me so in a quiet voice, and I was only half listening to him while thinking of other things.

It felt foggy inside my head. I heard that Claudia was completely uninjured, that Ergnade and Gunther only suffered light injuries, and that the Shiru tribe in the hidden passage remained safe, but that did nothing to help clear up the fog.

Although the enemy's plan failed and we defended Fort Jugfena successfully, it was a difficult, close victory with many losses. Three entire infantry squadrons were wiped out, and all archers were dead as well. On top of that, the commander of the fort, Earl Einsbark, as well as his son Wiegraf, they were seriously injured, and twenty soldiers from the fifty soldiers I took with me to Fort Jugfena died in battle as well, costing me forty percent of my army.

What's more, the invading soldiers had likely focused on destroying Arxia's lines of defense, the rampart alongside our border was smashed all over the place, and there were quite a few holes in Fort Jugfena and its walls as well, we've been dealt quite a blow.

The Densel Dukedom is saying that all of this was a private war waged by exiled soldiers, thus having nothing to do with them. They only prepared a slight compensation for us by selling off the properties of those involved, and executing all the responsible parties and their relatives.

It seems that the group of soldiers had been exiled after a political defeat, and that they had been from a group that opposed Densel uniting together with the Rindarl Union.

While looking for a way to survive, they attacked Arxia thinking that the other three countries might reconsider letting Densel into the Rindarl

Union if Densel was involved in a war with Arxia, that seems to have been their motive. Being worried about how relations between Arxia and Rindarl would be, Densel would prefer not to have bad relations with us. Well, that's their excuse, but I'm sure it's all just lip service and was plotted by them.

Meaning, all Arxia got was the execution of the so-called anti-Rindarl Union members.

Of course, saying such things, Arxia is quite angry and discontent as well. Not only did Densel attack us unprovoked, they even abandoned their own citizens and shifted all the blame to them, having the soldiers executed saying they were exiled political discontents.

The ones who lost the most was us, as the Kaldia domain was supposed to take in the new Artolan refugees that had all died, and the Shiru tribe. Although Densel attacked Fort Jugfena unprovoked and without warning, since Fort Jugfena was on standard combat alert, damage could have been even worse.

However, the northern Arxian nobles loudly blamed the harboring of refugees from a former defeated country that was enemies with Densel for causing this skirmish, it seems that there's no way of stopping the world from viewing these things as having caused the skirmish anymore.

"The House of Lords has made its decision on the matter, the battle that occurred will not be treated as an invasion by Densel, and it will be treated as a private war waged by exiled soldiers. This is in order to quell the anger of the northern nobles, so no matter how angry we are inside, we have no choice but to take it quietly and accept the paltry compensation money offered by Densel."

For once, Earl Terejia didn't even try to hide his irritation, but I didn't really care. I felt like politics didn't matter to me at all right now.

Everything felt blank to me right now. My head was filled with fog and I couldn't think clearly, I even wondered just what Earl Terejia was getting so angry about.

"The church had openly called out for us to protect the Artolan

refugees. None of them publicly opposed that back then.”

Since the church had openly proclaimed that the Artolan refugees and the Shiru tribe would be protected, anyone saying something otherwise could have been excommunicated and persecuted for being a heretic.

Even more than being a heretic, it's excommunication that would affect one for life. Since the Arxia Kingdom and the Ar Xia church are inextricably interconnected, being excommunicated would mean there's no place for them anymore. This is even more so for nobles, they wouldn't dare go directly against the church that's in charge of the law.

The issue of the church being in charge of the law aside, the Ar Xia church usually almost never involves itself in the country's national affairs. This time had been extremely rare for it to act like that, is what I had thought at the time.

My mind feels numb, I don't feel like thinking any more deeper into these matters. Even though this is all something that deeply involves me, right now I don't care about others' expectations or feelings at all.

“.....That's all. Well, for now you can just take things slow and get some rest.”

Earl Terejia seemed to worry about me with his last comment, as he left my room. My nanny Mrs. Hortensia remained standing quietly beside me, as I pulled the cushion supporting my back away, and laid back down on my bed. Her expression was softly distorted, and her eyes were closed.

I can tell that she's pitying me, and the way I am now, I could only receive it without any sort of mercy on myself.

I don't even feel like I deserve to receive pity, and my usual dedication to work had disappeared without a trace. Without even trying to clear my mind, I simply closed my eyelids.

Was it because I'm tired, I don't even know. However, I do know for certain that I want to fall into a deep sleep.

From the other side of my bedroom door, I could hear a slightly muffled voice.

“She didn’t move at all again today?”

“.....Yes. It’s already been like this for one month. Eliza-sama’s not doing anything by herself at all, other than blinking her eyes and breathing.”

“I see. This is, no matter what, sad for a child as young as her..... I’m sorry, but please keep taking care of her. Please don’t mind that you have to take care of her meals and body, someone experienced in these types of things is coming in a few days.....”

.....After that, I couldn’t hear what followed after anymore. The blurry words got lost in the fog, and disappeared somewhere into my mind.

I’m so sleepy, is all I thought. That’s all I could think, and my consciousness completely sank into the depths of the fog.

Illustrations



Credits

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